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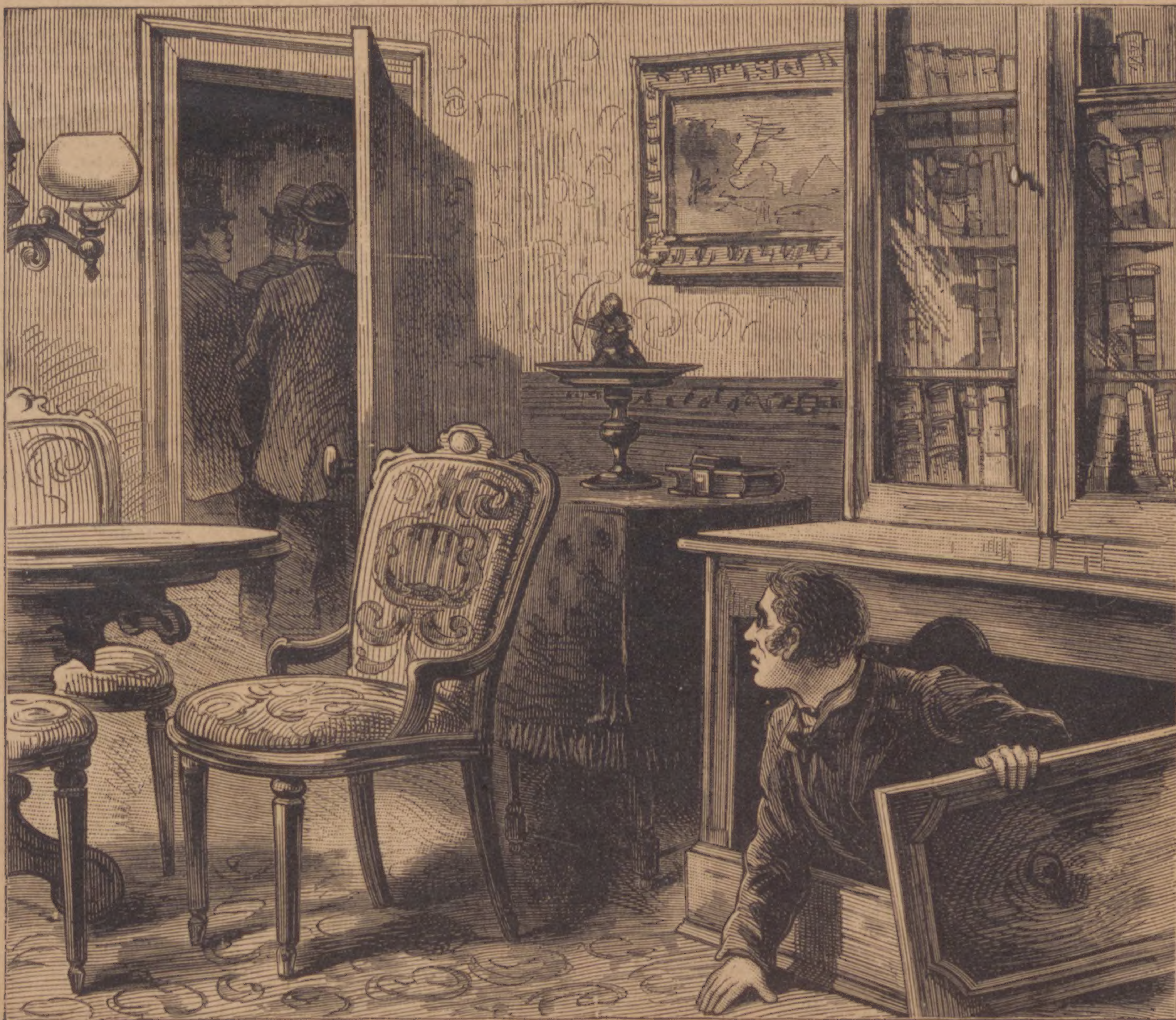
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STEVE STARR, THE DOCK DETECTIVE.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING,

AUTHOR OF "DETECTIVE CLAXTON," "OLD DOUBLEDARK," "DARK JOHN," "YANK YELLOWBIRD," ETC., ETC.



STEVE STARR PARTIALLY EMERGED FROM HIS HIDING-PLACE, WHERE HE HAD OVERHEARD EVERY WORD.

Steve Starr,

THE DOCK DETECTIVE;

OR,

The Female Race Track Sharp.

A Story of New York's Great Water Front.

BY WM. H. MANNING,

AUTHOR OF "DETECTIVE CLAXTON," "OLD DOUBLEDARK," "DARK JOHN," "YANK YELLOWBIRD," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SOUNDS OF A TRAGEDY.

It was a house with a history. Outside there was nothing to be seen but plain brick walls such as make the shell of many an other residence in the city of New York, and among the persons who passed it day by day there were but few who would have picked it out as a place with any features of special interest.

Yet, there were those who could have told that, fallen into a degree of decay though it had, it was far from commonplace in its present day; and they could have told that scenes of striking and varied character were there enacted still.

The man who sat in the parlor, alone, on the evening when this record opens, knew but little of the house or its occupants. Arriving in the city but three days before, he had picked up a paper and read that "tips" on the races were to be had from "Lady Blanche"—so the signature read.

He was a man of the world; a traveler of experience; but the novelty of the matter impressed him. "Tips" from a woman. Good! He would see her. He did; he paid for his information; his horse had won at the suburban course, and he had come again on this evening, attracted not so much by a desire to obtain fresh tips—though that was his ostensible object—as by a desire to see Lady Blanche once more.

But she was not in, and he had waited long and rather impatiently for her return.

He rose and paced the room wearily.

"A long delay!" he murmured, in a soft voice. "Some would say the game was not worth the powder, but I want to see this dazzling woman again. As a giver of tips on the races she is, of course, like all the rest—incapable of doing more than to vouchsafe a blind guess that such and such horses will win, but as a woman—Well, that is different. Lady Blanche is a good one!"

He wound up with a light little laugh.

He had the habit of laughing often, this dapper little man who admired Lady Blanche; but his laugh was not agreeable. He possessed a round, rosy, smooth face which, at first sight, would impress one as very amiable, but there was something unnatural in his good humor, and keen observers might have suspected that his amiability was not more than surface deep.

At the cheap New York hotel where he had registered he had inscribed the name, Asher Windham, on the book. It was the only biography any one in the city could have given of him.

His present pacing of the room took him near the door. He suddenly stopped short.

"Sounds!" he murmured. "Has my charmer returned?"

He listened with his ear closer to the door than good breeding permitted, but this did not trouble him.

The stir he had detected outside continued, and he knew some one had entered the house. He cared little what was going on there except that he desired to see Lady Blanche, but he continued to listen. All at once he gave a slight start.

"What was that?"

It had been something very much like a cry of alarm or pain, or both combined, and Asher had seen enough of wild life to take note of such things and bring them down to a scientific point. All the more attentively he listened, and he was not without more to feed his ears upon. His lips parted, not in the habitual smile, but with a look almost wolfish.

"A struggle somewhere in the house!"

he murmured. "What does it mean? Is Lady Blanche giving somebody tips on the races, or is it a different kind of 'tip'?"

Alert Asher missed nothing. The struggle had been preceded by a cry. It could not be any friendly contest, and he grew so interested that he was about to open the door cautiously when he heard the sounds grow yet nearer.

Persons passed by in the hall—who, he had no means of knowing, but the steps were shuffling, as if one or more of the party could not walk easily.

Then a door closed and the sounds ceased for awhile. They had entered a room and were busy with—what? He was interested, but the evidence was not quite strong enough to warrant his taking chances by roaming about the hall.

He continued to wait with what patience he could, and thus ten minutes passed.

"No more disturbance," he muttered. "Men will get drunk, and it's possible that the divine Lady Blanche was leading some indiscreet friend to a place of rest. Very likely I shall hear no more—Ha!"

Asher had taken a step, but he now leaped up like a flash.

"Help! Murder! Mur-r-r—"

It was a cry to thrill even a hardened adventurer like him, and he ran to the door and listened eagerly—listened, but heard no more. On the shelf the clock ticked peacefully, and it was the only sound which broke the silence. Asher waited long and then shook his head.

"Over with, whatever it was. Does a drunken man cry out with the word 'Murder'? Sometimes, but not often. Has the amiable Lady Blanche been slaying a man? Ha! ha!"

The laugh broke off short. He heard the shuffling of feet again, and curiosity overcame all else. He opened the door a trifle and looked out. He saw two men passing along the extremity of the hall, and in their arms they bore a burden of striking shape.

"The game is netted!" breathed Asher.

Seeing the shape of the burden he did not doubt that it was the form of a man, but a garment of some sort was thrown over it and he could not say positively. The bearers entered a room at one side and the door closed.

"They carry away the dead!"

Asher whispered the words. He believed what he said, and would have been dull if he had not suspected it at all. His unconcerned manner did not hide the fact that the occurrences were very ominous.

"I'll make a note of it, though," he thought. "If this divine Lady Blanche is a slayer it behooves Asher Windham to look a little out!"

The minutes passed, but it seemed that the strange events were past. Silence had followed the cry of "murder!" and there was no more shuffling or disturbance in the hall. But after awhile a new sound came outside; the light laugh of a woman.

"Lady Blanche!" murmured the waiting caller.

Then followed a snatch of song, light and subdued, but merry, and quick, soft footsteps approached the room. The door opened; a woman entered; Asher sprung to his feet.

Before him was a creature of impressive appearance and many charms. She was beaming on him amiably, too, and advanced with outstretched hand and cordial manner.

"My dear Mr. Windham, I am pleased to see you," she observed, in a musical voice. "This is because I know if you played the horses I gave you there was nothing lost. Did I not select winners, sir?"

"You did, Lady Blanche," admitted Asher.

"I always do."

"Being a winner, yourself."

"Do you mean in races?"

"In races, on the track and elsewhere."

"You are a bit hazy."

"Unlike you. Permit me to explain that I believe you must be a winner in all things, madam."

"You are kind."

"I have eyes; and, madam, I am no callow stripling. I am a man of the world."

"When that honor is claimed it always wakens the natural inquiry, is he an adventurer, also?"

Asher laughed softly.

"Meaning me, madam?"

"Why do you think I mean you?"

"I am not a post, madam."

"No, Mr. Windham, you are not. You are a good deal keener than you look, I believe. Not that you look stupid; I don't mean that; but your bland smile may cover teeth. The tiger smiles, too."

Lady Blanche was playful; she was flip-pant; she spoke thus merely because she wanted to hear herself talk; yet it was possible she was getting much nearer to the truth than she would if she had sat down to analyze Asher critically.

Now he laughed aloud.

"You amuse me, madam. Man of the world I am, I admit; I could not be less after roving the world over as I have done; but I am not the tiger your fancy paints me. Ha! ha!"

"Of course not, Mr. Windham. Well, do you want more tips?"

"Just the plan, Lady Blanche. Give me the winners at the same place for tomorrow."

The adventurer knew the terms, and he pulled out the desired sum and passed it over to her. It was duly received, and he gained in return what she assured him would be the list of the winners. He did not scrutinize the names of the horses, for he was too old in worldly amusement to care especially for horse-racing. He knew the insincerity of it all, and left the playing to those less experienced.

What he wanted was to see Lady Blanche and talk with her.

The man was to be pardoned for this weakness. She was one to draw the attention and hold the eye. Handsome she was, and, though it was merely worldly good looks, she pleased the masculine fancy.

She was somewhat above the medium height, and of a superb form of voluptuous mold, while her face was brilliant. The color there was rich and regal—no paint did this young woman need to make her beautiful. Handsome and dashing, it was no wonder Asher saw and adored.

While he gazed he thought of the sounds he had lately heard in the house. He thought without any shudder, but he was curious to know more about the matter, and to know why some one had cried "Murder!" in his hearing.

He did not learn; she explained nothing, and he asked no questions.

He lingered as long as he could. He wanted to be near her, but he was a judge of human nature, and he saw that he was not wanted. She had dealt with him as a business person would, and she thought that ended it. So it did, for that occasion. He was not fool enough to delay where he was not desired.

"I will go," he thought, "but I shall want tips often. This divine woman must learn to see me as I see her."

He stood up to go.

"You will find the horses winners," murmured Lady Blanche.

"I trust so."

"And I hope to see you again."

"So you will."

"I should be glad to make you a regular customer."

"Very likely you will."

"You show good sense. Playing the races is a divine passion."

"Magnificent! Ha! ha!"

Asher could not help laughing. He would sooner have taken to fishing in the city sewers for sport than to bore himself with the races, but he was willing to fish for this woman.

"I shall come again," he repeated.

"Madam, are you supernaturally gifted?"

Lady Blanche laughed musically.

"No. I merely have good judgment."

"Yet, I believe you are a woman of genius. It shows in your face, in your smile, in your eyes. Such women can move the world. Things that are dull sink into nothingness before the power of genius. All-conquering, it is the motive power of life and of reason. The universe itself bows to such gifts. You are divinely blessed!"

Lady Blanche was not equal to following this outbreak, which was delivered with some fire, but she was pleased. Why not? She was complimented, and the woman who

has not the balance wheel of sincere self-respect, lives on compliments.

She answered well, and Asher gained the chance to remain a little longer, but he was too wise to tire her. He went away in due time, and Lady Blanche's melodious utterances were still in his ears, yet he was not all bound up in the situation. He had his wits and his eyes still about him, and having been left to find his way to the outer door alone, he saw a card on the floor and picked it up.

He read the name printed thereon, and then murmured:

"Who is he? Is he another man who follows the races? Or another who goes to see her just to bask in her smiles? Or one who has not to resort to device to see her? A rival, perhaps! Perdition! I will keep the card. I may yet have to see him!"

The thought made Asher laugh, though wherein lay the comical element, it would have puzzled any one but Asher to see.

Being on the sidewalk at last, he looked up and gazed at the windows. He could see nothing unusual.

"Where is the man who cried murder?" he wondered. "Dead? If so, he is out of his worldly misery. Lucky fellow! and thrice lucky if he died at the hands of Lady Blanche. Next to living for her, it would be a pleasure to die for her. Ha! ha!"

The man who shows undue amiability on the streets of New York, is rash, and Asher found this out. A beggar who had allowed others to go by unchallenged, spoke to the adventurer with a mournful tale. Asher listened to the end.

"So you are very hungry?"

"Yes."

"Without food for several days, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Great head! A man of your ability to fast should be able to make his fortune. My friend, I will give you something. Play the sixth race at the track to-morrow, and you will win if you take Snap Jim for either one, two, or three. Ha! ha!"

Off went Asher with his laugh ringing melodiously on the air, but he forgot the beggar at once.

"Lady Blanche was very cool after she came in, but what I heard before that will not down. Has she killed her man?"

CHAPTER II.

A PUZZLING MYSTERY.

ON one of the up-town cross streets of New York, and not far from Fifth avenue, stood a rather fine brown-stone house. The plate on the door bore the single word, "Tereston."

Within this house, on the evening when Asher Windham made his call on the female race-track sharp, a man was sitting in close communion with a newspaper. Over one article he had dwelt for a long time, and this was it:

"The loss of the bark Polly Ann has been more fully explained by the arrival in New York of Captain Hawk, her commander when she went to the bottom of the ocean. A reporter saw him to-day and he gave particulars of the loss.

"The Polly Ann left Calcutta in good condition, but was beset by trying weather and a heavy wind almost from the start. In this, however, there was nothing which seemed destined to destroy her until she sprung a leak in an especially bad period of the storm. In consequence of this leak and the sea then menacing them, she rapidly filled and went to her watery grave.

"The ship Rose Addison was near and took off the crew, but nothing was saved with them.

"The Polly Ann was a craft of long life and varied experience. She had seen service in various spheres of action, but for some time had been owned by Tereston Brothers & Brockway, merchants of this city, by whom she was used to bring opium, indigo and spices. They do not lose heavily by the wreck, it is thought, for the bark is said to have been insured in part."

The man who read this article placed his finger on the words for the hundredth time.

"They don't know all!" he murmured.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and added:

"I hope they never will know more!"

Far away was his look and it was possible that much of moment was passing in his mind. This was but natural, for he was Benjamin Tereston, one of the men mentioned in the newspaper article as owners of the Polly Ann.

He was still engaged, as if studying on a problem of difficult nature, when the door opened and a young lady entered. Her expression was quite as serious as his own, and she came forward quickly.

"Have you been out, Uncle Benjamin?" she asked.

"No, Ionice," he replied.

"I wish we had kept Captain Hawk here."

"Why?"

"There are a good many more questions I would like to ask him."

"Can't you wait until morning?"

Mr. Tereston made the inquiry testily, and she quickly answered:

"Am I to blame for wanting to know the fate of my father?"

"Fate? Pshaw! pshaw! Edmund will soon turn up all right."

"Then why don't we hear from him?"

"His letters may have miscarried—"

"The same old argument!"

"Ditto, from you. Why will you let this trouble you, Ionice? Do you give him credit for no wisdom? I tell you he is quite able to care for himself."

"You are unfeeling!"

Ionice made the exclamation with strong symptoms of an outburst of tears, and Benjamin Tereston grew more considerate.

"Child, you wrong me. If I thought there was danger I should be just as much worried as you, but I have known Edmund Tereston for sixty years, and I never knew him to be wanting in resources. While I am not able to explain his whereabouts I am sure he will appear shortly, and in good condition."

"I believe he sunk on the Polly Ann."

"Nonsense! Didn't Hawk say he did not take passage on her?"

"And didn't father write me he was on board the bark and all ready to sail?"

"Doubtless he changed his mind at the last moment."

"But, Hawk says he did not come on board at all!"

"True," and the man rubbed his chin and seemed depressed about something.

"Captain Hawk must have lied about it!" declared Ionice, with spirit.

"Pshaw! pshaw!"

"Then how do you explain it?"

"Why should Hawk lie?"

"Just what I wish to know."

"He don't lie."

"If you take that ground you practically assert that the letter from father was a lie."

"Ionice, I am surprised at you!" asserted Mr. Tereston. "You ought not to speak so disrespectfully of your father."

"I have not spoken in any such way, and you are well aware of it. It is you who are indifferent to his well being and situation, and I wish that, instead of trying to make me give no thought to the matter, you would give thought to it, yourself. Why should we be blind to all that concerns him?"

"We are not, for—"

"When the bark lay in Calcutta," Ionice went on, "a letter was mailed to me by father in which he said he was on board the vessel and would sail with Captain Hawk. Since then no news has come from him. Now, Hawk declares he did not come on board at all. I regard that as very strange."

"I infer," replied Benjamin, "that the letter was written before Edmund went on board, and that he did not go, really. He changed his mind, you see, and it was too late to stop the letter—"

"Then why didn't he write again?"

"That I don't know."

"And you want me to wait longer?"

"What else can we do?"

"See the police! start investigation!"

"Eh?" and Benjamin gave a nervous start; then sat looking at his niece in a most peculiar way.

"See the police!" she repeated.

"What can they do? We are not in Calcutta."

"We are in New York, and so is Captain Hawk."

"What do you mean?"

"That I think Hawk should be investigated. I do not like the looks of the man, and it will not be wasted time to learn something more about him than we do know—"

"Why, he has sailed the Polly Ann two voyages before this. Not know him? Pshaw!"

"Then there is the chance of seeking information of the crew."

"Why should we?"

"To learn if Hawk has lied."

Mr. Tereston wiped his forehead nervously, as there was perspiration there—though the evening was not warm.

"Ionice," he muttered, "when a crew is shipwrecked it's not easy to locate them afterward. Some of this party came with Hawk to port, but all may have taken service again and gone off on another voyage. It would be absurd for us to meddle with them. Let it drop—"

A servant appeared at the door, and close behind her was an old family friend who lived not many blocks distant. He nodded genially and said in a matter-of-fact way:

"So Edmund is back, is he?"

"Not yet," replied Benjamin.

"But I saw him."

"Eh? When?"

"To-night."

Ionice was looking at the speaker in a dazed way. If she had regarded her uncle with equal attention she would have detected an expression of positive consternation on his face. He relapsed into silence, but the caller added:

"He was in a cab."

"Where?" asked Ionice, quickly.

"On Canal street."

"To-night?"

"Yes."

Positive was the tone, but there was no look of relief on the girl's face. She believed she knew her father well enough to be sure that if he had arrived in New York he would first of all hasten to her, and, to her, there was evidence of some mistake.

"I was walking along there," went on the caller, "when the cab passed me. I saw it in that hazy way we do see things in which we are interested, and then out of the window popped Edmund's head. It went back in just about as quick, but I saw enough to be sure of what I say. He was there."

Ionice turned to her uncle. The singular look was not wholly gone from his face, and the thought flashed into her mind:

"This frightens him. Why?"

Benjamin saw her scrutiny and rallied.

"An error of yours, Benson. Edmund is not back."

"Confound it! don't I know him?"

"It seems not."

"Well, this I'll swear to, He was in that cab!"

And Mr. Benson shut his teeth together with emphasis equal to his words. He had a chance to gaze at his companions for some time before anything more was said, for he had surprised them both. Ionice was in a mood where she would gladly have caught at anything which promised relief, but it was asking a good deal of her when she was required to believe that her father was back in New York and had not made himself visible to her.

The affair was discussed further, but with such a wide difference of opinion there was not much chance for a solution of the two-fold mystery.

Though Benson would not give way an inch in his opinion, he did not see any reason why he should insist forcibly on his claim. He finally went away, leaving Benjamin and Ionice to themselves.

They sat and looked for some time before she asked:

"What do you think of it?"

"Edmund may be back, but if he is, why is he not here? Why should he go roaming about the city? In my opinion it is a case of mistaken identity."

"I wish," said Ionice, with a shiver, "that I knew he was alive."

"My dear child, don't let idle fears bother you. Be assured that your father is all right. He will come to hand safe and sound."

"But if he failed to take the bark in Calcutta, as planned, what became of him? Why has he not written?"

"Rest easy for a few days and we shall know, I feel sure."

Ionice sighed and shook her head. The forebodings had taken too deep root in her mind to be shaken off. She feared for her father's life!

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERY OF THE RED ROVER.

THE sergeant on duty at the Old Slip police station was talking with a handsome young man when another person entered. He wore the garments of a sailor, and his whole appearance went to certify that he was what he seemed.

He rolled, rather than walked, up to the desk and squared himself for business.

"Is the captain in?" he asked.

"He is not," replied the sergeant, "but I represent him."

"Be you the first mate?"

"Yes."

"Then it's all right. I've come on business, ye see."

"Go on!"

"My name is Hick Peters, an' I'm an able seaman on the good ship, Red Rover."

"Yes?"

"Sure, messmate! She's layin' in the dock down yon, as you may see by lookin' fer yourself."

"I think I remember her. Just discharging her cargo, isn't she?"

"All done, now. The stevedores have h'isted the cargo an' we are layin' around loose."

Mr. Peters was slow to come to the point, but the sergeant was patient. The sailor was peculiar in his manner, and it was amusing to watch him.

"I suppose you are having a good time now?"

"No, I ain't," replied the sailor, with emphasis. "I've lost my best messmate."

"How is that?"

"Just what I want to know. Tell me that an' I'll draw my wad!" and the speaker slapped his pocket.

"Is it a case of a missing man?"

"Yes."

"Went to some South street sailors' boarding-house. I dare say?"

"Ef you dare to say that you'll say what ain't correct, sir. Ben Bipps went out o' sight on or nigh the bark."

"Tell us about it."

"Well, it's like this: Ben Bipps an' me has sailed together many a voyage, an' a few days ago we jest come in on the bark Red Rover, Captain Ezra Thomes. All was lovely until, one night, when I come on board late, after shore leave, Ben wa'n't there, an' by gracious! he ain't been seen sence. Some o' the lads was sure he was on board durin' the evenin', but they was havin' a good time, all, an' I guess they had more rum in their stomachs than was good fer their eyes. I don't know positive whether Ben was there or not, but he hadn't said nothin' ter me about goin' out, an' I'm next ter sure he disappeared off o' that very bank."

"Hasn't he deserted?"

"Not by a long shot! He would 'a' let me know."

"Had he an enemy?"

"No."

"Then you don't fear there was foul play?"

"But I do, though!"

"Why?"

"Because Ben wouldn't go off so unless there had been," stubbornly answered Hick. "This is what I have thought all along," pursued the sailor, with a fresh grip on his subject, "but I hadn't no notion o' callin' in help until of somethin' I heard this evenin', you see, so I come ter you."

"What did you hear?"

"D'ye know the fruit-stand down nigh the dock kept by Trezzo Petresso, an' tended by his darter Carma?"

"No."

"Or a man named Pardon Gallup?"

"Mr. Peters, you are firing classic names at me rapidly, and I can hardly grasp them, but I admit I know none of these persons."

"Pardon Gallup comes pretty nigh bein' a tramp, I should say."

"What about him?"

"Well, he is a feller who ain't always got a home, an' it seems by his tell that he crawled inter some hole on the pier, that night, an' heard somethin' singular. He

says there was a man murdered on the bark, that night."

"Ah! and where is he?—Pardon Gallup, I mean."

"That's what I want you to find out. He happened along by the Eyetalian's fruit-stand an' tried ter tell him about it, but I guess the Eyetalian didn't give him much encouragement, fer there wa'n't no great particulars given. Now, Pardon Gallup has drifted off, an' where he is I don't know an' can't find out."

The sergeant saw he was not making any great progress by questioning Hick Peters, and he suddenly changed his manner.

"You want us to look into this, do you?" he inquired.

"Yes. Ef you'll send a first-class detective ter tackle the job, I am willin' ter foot the bills as long as my stuff holds out."

Here Hick slapped his pocket again, and his manner was that of a millionaire. The sergeant turned to the young man who had been with him when Hick entered, and who had been a silent listener to all that had been said, and, with a smile, remarked:

"Here is a case for your skill, Starr."

It was plain that he was not in earnest, but Mr. Starr quietly answered:

"I will look into it, if I can."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. I am not busy."

"Go ahead, then."

"You know I have figured on South street before."

"Yes. Well, go in." The sergeant turned to Hick and added: "This gentleman is Mr. Starr, a detective, and if your missing messmate is to be found he will unravel the mystery."

The sailor crossed over to Starr quickly.

"This suits me!" he asserted. "You have a good figure-head, an' you're about the sort I want on the case. Come along, an' I'll put ye enter it right spry."

"I will."

"What shall we do first?"

"I should say, see the Italian fruit-vender and his daughter."

"Set sail, then, and cruise along in my wake."

"This gentleman," announced the sergeant, "is known as—"

Starr made a gesture and stopped the explanation, whereupon the sergeant nodded and let it drop. If he had gone on he would have told something of the career of the detective, and made plainer the chance allusion to previous service in the vicinity of South street.

Hick and Starr left the station-house. When they went out the detective was not especially impressed with the case, and his only motive in volunteering his service was to help his companion from the sea. He little suspected how important a case was to develop out of this humble beginning—he little thought that the disappearance of Ben Bipps would soon grow insignificant in the light of other events.

During the short walk he tried to get all possible light to the case, and Hick talked very freely, but there was little gained. It was very uncertain what had been told to the Italian by Pardon Gallup, and, except for that there was nothing to the matter except that Ben Bipps had disappeared mysteriously—something not unusual for a sailor to do when in port.

Hick had mentioned that Trezzo Petresso had evinced a desire to say next to nothing about the matter, and, knowing how common this idea was among the Italians as a whole, Starr had no great faith that they would succeed any better now.

He hailed it as a good omen when, arriving at the fruit-stand, they found Trezzo absent and only his daughter in charge. Carma was a bright-faced girl, and not without some claims to good looks. What she might have been, further, if reared with care, was uncertain, for she had been a child of the streets from her earliest youth, and the Italian part within her was not prominent. She was like other girls reared as she had been.

Expecting difficulty, Starr had cautioned Hick and told him what to say making him acquainted with the people of the fruit-stand, and Hick did his duty.

"Carma," he said, "this is another friend o' my lost messmate, an' he's come ter inquire about Ben Bipps."

"I don't know nothin' about Ben Bipps, see?"

The girl evinced a desire to avoid talk on the subject, but it was not done with the stolidity of those of the race born under the suns of Italy, so Starr was encouraged to proceed and try and beat down the reserve.

In a short time he had done so, and she was ready enough to talk.

"No, I don't know where Pardon Gallup is," she remarked, "but he's a sandwich man."

"Where does he sell 'em?" inquired Hick.

"Sell what?"

"Sandwiches."

Carma broke into a laugh.

"You must be precious green," she declared. "He don't sell sandwiches, at all, and the kind o' sandwiches you are thinkin' of ain't the kind he is. Ef you's to see him you would notice a board on his back an' another over his stomach, and the two tied together over his neck; an' there would be an advertisement on each one."

"But what about sandwiches?" asked Hick.

"Why, ain't he sandwiched in between the two boards? That's why he's called a sandwich man."

Light broke in upon Hick, but he still seemed bewildered at this insight to the mysteries of city life and terms.

"I see," he agreed, doubtfully.

"That's his profession," added Carma, "but most o' the time he's out o' a job an' lives like a tramp."

"Has he no home?" inquired Starr.

"Only the police stations."

"Well, what did he tell you?"

"Nothing. He told my father, but I listened, an' I heard it all."

"He slept on the pier, one night, did he?"

"Yes."

"What did he see and hear?"

"First, he saw a cab drive down to the pier an' a woman get out an' go on board the Red Rover."

"A man and a woman. What were they like?"

"He did not say."

"What followed?"

"Where he lay was close ter the cabin, an' he heard them have an interview in there with somebody. It was a hot quarrel, though what was said I don't know, fer he didn't say; but it wound up in a fight. He says somebody was killed in there, though how he knew I can't say."

"Murder was done, eh?" muttered Starr. "That is ominous!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE CASE GROWS SURPRISINGLY.

THE detective looked thoughtful and was silent for some moments. He was wondering what connection the man and the woman—especially the latter—could have had with the taking off of a common sailor, if, indeed, Ben Bipps had been killed on the night in question.

"What more?" Starr inquired, presently.

"That's all," answered Carma, quietly.

"Father did not encourage the sandwich man to talk about it, and nothin' more was said. Pardon Gallup jest told that he had heard a murder done, an' then he went off. We ain't seen him sence."

Hick Peters was winking to Starr at a great rate, and when the latter had found that no more was to be got from Carma he went aside with the sailor.

"Them stevedores has done it!" asserted Hick.

"What stevedores?"

"The ones that took our cargo off."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because Ben Bipps had trouble with one o' them."

"But the woman?"

"It was about her."

"What about her?"

"Well, you see, Ben took a drop too much, as he does now an' then, an' he took the notion ter kiss the wife o' one o' the stevedores. He was a fool, an' I told him so then, but he did it. Well, her husband lit on Ben, and so did she. The husband struck an' she scratched, an' between the two they made Ben's face look like a map o' the West Indies; but Ben knows how ter use his fists, an' he beat them off. Then the stevedore

swore he would have revenge, an' I reckon he had it."

"Aided by his wife?"

"Yes."

"Did you get the notion from what was told us that the cabin mentioned was the captain's cabin?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me how the stevedore and his wife could gain access to that sacred place, and what Ben Bips was doing there?"

"By gracious! I didn't 'think o' that!" admitted Hick.

"Again, even if the cabin was open to them, would they dare to go on board to get at Ben?"

"No!"

Hick admitted that, too, but, after a pause, he stubbornly added:

"But it was them stevedores, anyhow."

Starr was silent, but his mind was busy. He was thinking that if the case assumed the proportions to make such a step necessary he was well prepared to go into the work. Once, he had been selected for a case where he disguised himself, somewhat, gained position as a stevedore, and worked on the piers as a laborer while unraveling his mystery. From that detective service he had gained the sobriquet of "Stevedore Steve." His full name was Robert Stephen Starr, but he had dropped the first of these names when engaged with hooks and the Stevedores' trade.

As no one outside the police force knew he had been a man of double life, when thus employed, he could at any time go back and nobody would be the wiser as to his identity.

"Suppose," suggested the detective, anon, "that we go on board the Red Rover. Can it be done?"

"Why, of course."

"Safely?"

"Sartain. I'll take you on as a friend o' mine, ye see."

"Can we see the captain's cabin?"

Hick scratched his head doubtfully.

"Wal, that depends. Ef the old man is on board, it's out o' the question, but ef he ain't, it might be done, mebbe."

"Let us try, but, first of all, let me get into other clothes. I have opportunity to do this by going to a resort of mine not far away, and when it's done, I shall attract far less attention than I should with my present suit on."

"Good! Go an' do it."

Starr went, and when he returned he was clad in garments of cheap quality and poor style. It was a suit he had worn when he was posing as "Stevedore Steve," when that man dressed in his supposed best, and, in addition, he had tangled his hair so that he did not look like himself. Hick was astonished, and duly expressed his admiration over the change, and, as there now seemed to be no reason why they should not go on board the vessel, they went.

The Red Rover lay just where she had been ever since she entered the dock, and Steve scanned her closely. She seemed to be a bark that had seen a good deal of use, though still seaworthy, and her appearance was not exactly trim.

Starr was no novice in sea matters, and he followed Hick to the deck with an air of unconcern. Nobody challenged them, and the guide went through the form of showing a friend around.

Of course there was nothing of real interest except the captain's cabin, and it was that which attracted them and drew them in a certain direction at last.

Hick had taken opportunity to inquire if Captain Thomes was on board. He had received a negative reply, but that his informant was in error, was shown to be the fact.

The magnate of the Red Rover was found in the main cabin, reading a paper.

"That knocks us out," observed Steve.

"Ye-es."

"No way to get to his private quarters unseen, eh?"

"No."

The detective stood still and studied the face of the skipper.

Ezra Thomes would not have been called a handsome man even by his friends, but he was a very keen-looking person. Lank of

body and lean of face, he had on that face a peculiarly shrewd, calculating expression which stamped him one who would never forget that his chief concern in life was to take care of Ezra Thomes.

Barring this unpleasant sharpness, he was not an ill-looking man.

While Steve was still gazing, there was a stir on deck and Hick first investigated and then announced:

"Visitors!"

"Who?"

"Don't know, but one o' them is a woman."

"Are they likely to stay long?"

"They may; you can't tell about a woman."

"Then let us learn something of them if we can. Keep a little back while they pass us. I do not want to be noticed."

"Yes, we'll stand over here an'—"

Hick's speech died away, and even the detective was affected by the striking specimen of womankind that went toward the cabin. She was young, queenly and beautiful, and the way she swept along made Hick mutter, when he did find his voice:

"Acts as if she owned the whole bark, by gracious!"

"The captain knows her?"

"Yes."

"But you never saw her before?"

"No."

"Well, of course she isn't the woman who did away with Ben Bips, is she?"

"Ha! ha!" laughed Hick. "I should say not; she ain't no stevedore's wife, nor a person who would have interest, good or bad, in Ben Bips."

Just as he made this assertion one of the other sailors approached. Nodding his head toward the cabin he asked:

"D'ye know her?"

"No, Tom. Do you?"

"I ought ter."

"Why?"

"She's the one our cargo was consigned to."

"You don't say so!"

"Yes, that is Mrs. Armstrong."

"The dickens it is! I know the cargo was consigned to a woman, but that's all I did know. So she's the lady, eh?"

"Sure! That's Mrs. Blanche Armstrong."

"Mr. Blanche Armstrong is a lucky dog," quoth Hick. "Whew! what rosy cheeks she had! Jest a corker, she is—blow me ef she ain't!"

"I don't know her old man," added the second sailor, "though I believe his name is Ansel Armstrong. Seems her majesty must have the rocks, herself, an' be a business woman. Anyhow, the cargo was consigned to her."

"Well, she's a clipper sort of a craft which makes the old Red Rover look dull in comparison."

"That's right, but she ain't fer us, Hick; so don't 'git mashed on her!" and with a laugh the sailor passed on.

"This don't seem to concern us," remarked Steve, "and as we can do nothing while is around, suppose we go out on the pier and sit down."

Hick did not object, and they went accordingly. Finding a good spot they sat on the edge of the pier and let their feet dangle off.

"We must be about where the sandwich man was," observed Steve. "He found some recess, you know, and it was doubtless near at hand. We must be near the captain's cabin."

This remark did not impress either of them as important, then, but it was destined to do so later on. They talked about trivial matters for awhile, and then Hick nudged his companion.

"They have gone into the cabin."

"Yes. We can now see about how good a chance the sandwich man had to overhear what occurred there the other night. Listen!"

A voice floated to their ears—the voice of a woman, and, doubtless, that of the consignee of the Red Rover's cargo.

"It must have rolled into some corner," she remarked.

"I don't believe it was lost here," was returned in the tones of Captain Thomes.

"Then where is it?"

"I don't know, but a diamond gives out a

good deal of sparkle, and I should have seen it if 'twas here, I think."

"Do you suppose the stevedores found it?"

"Well, I should hope not. Don't suggest that we must rely upon their caution to keep more of our secret. Confound it! why couldn't the job have been done without their being aware of it. A stevedore would be immensely benefited by what he could make out of us, and, once let suspicion get started, they would be likely to tattle."

Thomes was evidently on his knees, engaged in a search, while he spoke, as was indicated by his husky utterance.

"Make haste!" urged Mrs. Armstrong. "I do not like this place. The very walls seem to cry out and say: 'Murder!'"

"Hush! hush!" exclaimed Thomes. "No more of that talk!"

"Nobody can hear us here."

"I am not so sure of that. You are reckless."

"Nonsense! Do you think I would be that when money and life are at stake? Who else has more to lose than I?"

"Well," growled Thomes, "we are all liable to get our necks stretched. I should call that losing a good deal all around."

"Thomes, are you weakening?" demanded the woman, with sarcasm.

"Do you think I am?"

"It looks that way."

"Then you don't know me, but I am not fool enough to want to put my own neck in to the noose. The blamed detectives can do enough in that line without our help."

Hick Peters nudged Starr suggestively.

"They don't know how near right that is," he whispered.

"Hush!" replied the detective. "We are on the track of bigger game than we suspect!"

CHAPTER V.

THE CRIME OF THE CABIN.

STEVEDORE STEVE was quick with his warning, but his manner was as cool as if the subject was one of the most trivial sort. He had checked Hick Peters, and he now proceeded to listen with all possible intentness. The conversation went on inside.

Captain Thomes growled indistinctly as if still stooping down.

"There ain't no diamond here," he announced.

"Look further!" directed Mrs. Armstrong.

"Ain't I looked already faithfully? Who knows there was a diamond, anyhow? I didn't see one."

"As if you would, anyhow! Men would not see such things if the diamond was as big as a church. He wore one; it was lost; and it must have been lost in this cabin. Or can it have been knocked out of the window during the struggle? Look and see."

"Do you think I can see through twenty feet of water? And if I could I wouldn't, for there might be a dead man rise. It's all well enough to look for a diamond, Blanche, but to find the dead when we did the killing is not to my liking."

"Ezra Thomes, you have taken leave of all the sense you used to have!" declared Mrs. Armstrong, sharply. "I did not intend that you should look in the water, but I thought the diamond might have lodged somewhere around the window, itself—an absurd notion, perhaps. Well, do you give it up?"

Evidently Thomes was standing, now.

"Yes," he replied.

"Unfortunate, but possibly unavoidable. We ought to have it, so that the confounded thing could not arise and accuse us of the crime."

"Murder will out, they say!" grumbled Thomes.

"Bah! why are you so weak?" snapped the woman. "I defy everything, and I have no fear."

"You are a woman of adventure, and accustomed to take constant risks with the police. You are hardened to such things, you see, and I ain't. If them confounded stevedores should peach—"

"Didn't we pay them to keep still?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then rest easy. Our work is done, and we need have no more worry about it. The

stevedores are safe unless the police get at them, and the police have no clue to this matter. Now, let us drop the subject and return to the main cabin. I am not timid, but these walls recall that red tragedy all too much."

"You bet they do," admitted the captain, "and I ain't slept here since it happened. His ghost would rise—"

"Bah! you are notional!" retorted the woman. "What was a life when we had so much to gain?"

With these words the speakers passed out of the cabin, and the listeners on the pier heard no more. Hick Peters looked at his companion and whispered:

"Ben Bipps is gone up, sure!"

"Come with me!"

Steve led the way to a safe place and then turned upon his companion with the question:

"What have we struck?"

"Ben Bipps has been murdered by them!" declared Hick.

"Murder has been done, surely, as we can see by their own confession. There's no other way to look at it."

"Poor Ben!"

"Was he romantic?"

"Was he what?"

"Romantic."

"Thunder! no; not any more than a pine knot."

"Are you sure all this refers to Ben Bipps?"

"Who else could it be?"

"Just what I want to know. Did Ben wear a diamond?"

For the first time Hick's solemn face lost its grave expression and he laughed heartily, though in a subdued way.

"No more than he did a gold mine. Why, Ben was a lad who spent his money as fast as he could get his hands on it, and as for havin' a diamond, why, he was homely as a scarecrow, an' he dressed like a scarecrow, too."

"Then what about the diamond?"

"Somebody else had it."

"Can you surmise who?"

"No."

"We haven't got hold of all this, Hick. Besides the evidence of the diamond we have the statement from Mrs. Armstrong's own lips that she had 'money and life' at stake in this affair. Yet, you say Ben was a spend-thrift."

"So he was."

"Also, he was homely and free from gallantry and romance, so he could have had nothing in common with Mrs. Armstrong."

"But he did kiss the stevedore's wife, an' them folks in the cabin spoke about stevedores bein' in it."

"Hick, I shall soon blossom out as a stevedore."

"Sure?"

"Yes. I am impressed with the belief that there is more to this than we can see, as yet, and I am so curious about the case that I am going into it in earnest. All shall be sifted if I can get at it."

"Messmate, you are a brick, an' I wish you luck—I do, by gracious!"

Hick shook Steve's hand warmly, but the detective remained grave and thoughtful.

"We have almost positive proof that murder was done by these people. They say so themselves, anyhow. Furthermore, it looks as if the dead man was thrown into the dock, for Captain Thomes thinks a ghost may rise from the water to confront him, and he dares not sleep in his cabin of nights. That looks plain."

"Poor Ben Bipps!" murmured Hick.

"The folks in the cabin are afraid of having their necks 'stretched,' as Thomes aptly expressed it. Well; if there is danger for them I will do my best to bring the fear to pass."

"Hang them stevedores!" growled Hick. "Why should they kill Ben just because he kissed the feller's wife? She ought ter have been proud of it."

"Did that cause the murder?"

"What else?"

"What had Captain Thomes and Mrs. Armstrong to do with the kissing of the stevedore's wife?"

"But they mentioned the stevedores."

"Yes. Stevedores were paid to keep the secret, and that is why I am to take up my

old role of 'Stevedore Steve.' But, Hick, we have bigger fish on the hook than Ben Bipps. We have struck something here of rare interest, and with such a woman in it as Mrs. Armstrong it is no small matter. She is consignee of the Red Rover's cargo, and must be a person of some importance—"

"Her looks shows that," interrupted Hick.

"Looks indicate nothing in New York. She may be anything but what she seems, for skim milk often masquerades as cream in our city of varied life, and personalities. We will look into this, Hick. Now, it will not do for us to linger here, for it's not likely she will stay a long time in the cabin. When she comes out I shall follow her."

"Good!"

"You will see she came in a cab. Well, I'll hunt up another cab, and go where she goes."

"Jest the figger!"

"Give me an address outside the bark where I can see you when I wish."

"Call at Mose Wiggins's sailor boarding-house, No. — South street, an' ef I ain't there you kin soon git word to me."

"I will, for I may need you. We are going to solve this mystery somehow, Hick."

"You bet we are, an' punish these critters. Poor Ben Bipps!"

Stevedore Steve went his way, and by the time that Mrs. Armstrong left the Red Rover he was all ready for the pursuit. The woman's cab rolled northward, and close after it came Steve's.

It was a long ride before the foremost vehicle paused and was dismissed by Mrs. Armstrong. Seeing that the chase was over the detective dispensed with his own conveyance, and then walked nearer to the building into which she had gone.

"It is devoted to flats," he muttered, "and far from being elegant. It is a cheap structure, and the neighborhood is cheap and doubtful of reputation. A queer place for the consignee of the Red Rover's cargo to live."

A voice sounded by the detective's side.

"A rare old bird, she is!"

Steve started, turned and saw a humble-looking man.

"Did you speak to me, sir?" he asked.

"Not exactly, but I spoke in general," the stranger vaguely replied.

"To what bird did you refer?"

"The old gal who went in there."

Steve detected a vein of sarcasm and resentment in the speech, and was quick to take advantage of it.

"May I ask if you know her?"

"Know her? Know her? Wal, I should say so! Why, man, I've jest lost my job as janitor of them flats because she lied point-blank about me to the boss."

"Why did she do that?"

"Natural cussedness," replied the stranger. "She has about as pretty pink cheeks as they make, but she's a devil, she is. Holds her head up high and makes a big splurge, but honor an' she ain't on such terms that they would shake hands."

"What do you know against her?"

"Boss, what do you think of a woman who has a husband who only shows up now an' then, but who runs the ranch all by herself, an', both when the husband is there an' at other times, has men visitors who look like they had come out o' Sixth ward saloons? I don't mean bummers, but flashy fellers; men who may be gamblers, or the Lord knows what."

"That's the way she does, is it?"

"Yes."

"What do you infer?"

"I make no charge against her. There has been some tall drinkin' an' carousin' in there, an' she has done her part—so has her husband, when he's been there—but she ain't done no worse violence ter good manners, so fer as I know. But there has never been a visitor in there so fer as I know, except them same flashy, sportive-lookin' fellers. How is thet fer a fine old gal?"

The ex-janitor's voice and manner plainly betrayed prejudice, but Steve Starr was impressed with the belief that he was telling the truth and no more. Certainly, he had been careful not to insinuate any more than he charged directly.

"What is her name?" asked the detective.

"Mrs. Blanche Armstrong, if she tells the truth, but you can't go much on birds of paradise like her. Her husband sails under the name of Ansel Armstrong. It may be his name."

"Are they rich?"

"Ha! ha! What do you think? Their flat is furnished at considerable cost, but as gaudy as a peacock's dress, and in poor taste. I suspect that the woman plays the races. She is gone a good deal of afternoons, and comes home late in the evening, and is decidedly of that style. Rich? Who can size up people who live that way? My notion is that they live from hand to hand."

"Do you suppose they are criminals?"

"Never saw a sign of it."

"And disturbances around the flat?"

"Only their drunken carousals."

"Is she in business of any kind, do you think?"

"Business? Ha! ha! Why, man, she is simply a high roller!"

CHAPTER VI.

SOMETHING IS OVERHEARD.

STEVE STARR felt that he was moving on. The report of the ex-janitor made Mrs. Blanche Armstrong out a very different woman from what she had naturally been pictured to be by those who had lately heard of her as the consignee of the cargo of the Red Rover. One view seemed to show her as a rich and "hustling" business woman, while the other pictured her, in the expressive language of the janitor, as a "high roller."

Having seen her the detective knew which she looked the most like.

It was the "high roller."

Blanche Armstrong began to be a fascinating creature in the eyes of the police agent, and he pursued the trail with avidity.

The ex-janitor was still willing to talk, and Steve duly encouraged him. Following up the last remarks he inquired:

"You say that when she goes out she does not return until late in the evening. What hour does that indicate?"

"Never before ten, and often not until twelve, one or two."

"Where do you suppose she is then?"

"I don't know, but I tell you she is a high roller."

"The male visitors are flashy-looking men, eh?"

"Yes."

"Ever see any one here who looked like a sailor?"

The janitor appeared surprised.

"Never!" he replied.

For some time longer the detective pursued his inquiries, but he gained nothing of value. His companion could tell of scenes in the Armstrong flat by the dozen, but this merely corroborated what he had outlined before. The most striking addition was that many bottles went into the flat full and came out empty, and that it was the mistress of the place who ordered them—more, that she did her share to empty them.

"I will leave you now," observed Steve, at last. "I am glad to have met you, and if you will give me your address I will call and see you again. I would like to keep up the acquaintance."

The ex-janitor's eyes twinkled.

"Because of Blanche?" he asked.

"Eh? Why of her?"

"You are interested in her—why, I know not, but you be. That ain't any of my business, but if I can help you in any way, let me know. I reckon you ain't in love with her, and I should rather work in the traces with you knowing you hated her than if you were her friend. Pity I ain't in the flat, still, fer I could help you much more."

"You say she was the means of getting you discharged?"

"She was."

"Was it a serious affair?"

"We had words, and she went and told the owner of the flats that I called her 'a fast old hen!' It wasn't true," declared the speaker, with an aggrieved air. "What I did say was that she was a gay old chick. That was very different."

"Decidedly," agreed Steve, smiling. "Was that all?"

"Yes."

"Who owns the flats?"

The ex-janitor gave the name and address of the owner.

"I will make a mental note of it, and it may be you will have your position back again," said Starr. "Owners are apt to give too much weight to the complaints of female tenants of doubtful character, but if they can be convinced of their error they sometimes retract the dismissal. Are you in need of money?"

"Not now, sir."

"Then rest easy for a few days and we will see what can be done. What is your own name?"

"Charles Mullen."

"I'll see you again, Mr. Mullen."

Starr thought he had learned all he could, then, so he took his departure. Charles walked with him for a short distance, and then they separated. The detective kept on and brought up at the hotel where he resided. It was not a place of public renown, but it had the merit of being respectable, and it answered his purpose well.

The dinner hour was at hand, and he went into the dining room and gave due attention to the repast provided. After that he went to his own room and sat down with a cigar as a companion.

"A curious case," he mused, as he smoked. "I don't see my way clear in it, yet, but it is plain that Hick Peters did not suspect how much of a case there was to it when he rolled into the station to say that Ben Bipps was missing. What is the rest of it, anyhow?"

Carefully he studied the evidence at hand, but it was not enough to give him much light. More of the facts must be developed before he could grasp the full truth, and this was what he intended to seek to do.

"I see no promise of a rich reward back of it all," he added, "but I do feel a personal interest, and I'll pursue the game further, anyhow."

When he sat down the detective had left the door of his room ajar slightly, and it was thus that, hearing a stir in the hall, he glanced out and saw a couple in the hall who were strangers to him.

One was a young lady; the other was a man who had all the appearance of a servant. The latter received only a casual look, but Steve was impressed with the former.

Pretty girls always make an impression, and as he noted the beauty, refinement and high-bred air of this especial girl the detective was led to forget his subject wholly.

"If she has come to be at the hotel she will brighten the place up wonderfully."

So he thought in a casual way—casual, because he did not expect ever to speak with her—and then he turned his head away.

A knock sounded at the door of the room next to his, and when it was opened he heard a voice say:

"A lady to see you, sir."

Steve's mind underwent a change. He knew it was a servant announcing the young lady he had seen, and it caused her to fall in his estimation. He had seen something of the tenant of the next room, and that much had not impressed him favorably.

He knew the tenant, who was a new arrival, was a seafaring man, and he had not admired him. What could the visitor want of such a rough person.

Whatever it meant she was admitted without delay, and he heard her greeted with coarse politeness. It was not odd that he heard this. The two rooms were "double" rooms, and a transom was over the door which connected them. This transom the seafaring man had opened some time during the day, and though Starr first discovered the fact now, and would have closed it promptly under other circumstances, he made no movement to do so now.

Thus, all that was said was distinctly audible.

"This is an unexpected honor, miss," growled the man.

"I came on business, Captain Hawk," was the reply.

"Uh! Did you?"

It was not a gracious response, but she did not heed it.

"Yes; I want to talk with you about my father."

"But I know nothing about him."

"Then there is a deep mystery somewhere."

"Mystery?"

"Yes."

"I don't see none."

"But, captain, what has become of father?"

"How do I know?"

"He wrote me he was to sail with you on the bark."

Robert Stephen Starr suddenly rose and went closer to the connecting door. Talk about a bark interested him; he had not forgotten that the Red Rover was a bark.

"Wal, he didn't sail with us," replied Captain Hawk, "so I do not see that there is anything more to it."

"Captain, do you mean to say that the truth is being told to me about this matter?"

"It was a direct, incisive question, and it seemed to roil the sea-faring man not a little."

"Do you mean to say that I am lying to you?" he demanded, sharply.

"I did not say that, and, if you are, it may be that you are seeking to do me a kindness by so doing. It may be that you think I cannot bear the shock of knowing that anything serious has happened to him. I have known of cases where such a policy was pursued, and as an act of kindness. It would not be so with me, for I had rather know the worst than to endure suspense—"

"But there ain't no worse, as I know."

"And if my father has been lost at sea, or elsewhere, or there is fear that he has been thus lost, I would esteem it great kindness on your part to let me know the worst, at once."

"But I didn't see him."

"He wrote me he was to sail with you."

"Must have changed his mind, miss."

"But he said he was already on board."

"Probably he jest intended to come on board, but didn't."

"Then why didn't he notify me?"

"That's your question!" flippantly returned the mariner.

"Captain Hawk?"

"Yes?"

"I am being deceived. There is a mystery about the last voyage of the bark!"

Steve pressed closer to the door. This was getting very exciting. Why was all this talk made about the bark, and what bark did they refer to, anyhow? He knew of a bark which had its mystery. Were they referring to the Red Rover?

Plainly, the seafaring man was not in sympathy with the subject, and he put a good deal of energy, and not a little mingling of resentment and concern into his reply as he answered:

"Nonsense, nonsense! You are going daft over this."

"Captain, did you have any passengers on the bark?"

"No."

"Where are the crew?"

"Don't know," was the surly reply.

"Did they come to New York?"

"Most o' them went along on the vessel which rescued us, to Liverpool, or elsewhere."

"Did any come here?"

"Yes," admitted Hawk, with renewed surliness.

"Where are they now?"

"Very likely they have shipped again, and are well out o' port."

"And are you the only man of all who were shipwrecked on the Polly Ann who is here?"

Steve Starr's face fell. So it seemed they were not talking about the Red Rover, after all. What did he care about the Polly Ann? He turned to leave the door, and then stopped short.

"I will hear it," he decided.

CHAPTER VII.

STEVE FINDS A "WANTED" MAN.

ANSWERING the last question, Captain Hawk replied:

"I don't pretend ter be the keeper o' the men shipwrecked from the Polly Ann, and I don't know where they are. I don't care, either."

The assertion was decidedly belligerent, and it brought trouble upon the mariner.

"What does your singular manner indicate?" asked the young visitor. "Is it a crime for me to wish to solve my father's fate, or what means your severity to me?"

Hawk had been rough enough, but he suddenly changed his way of speaking and acting.

"Hold on, miss; hold on! Don't misjudge an old salt who don't often meet one like you, an' ain't in polite society. I didn't mean to be rude, but it's my style ter speak so. Lord! I would tell ye of your father ef I could. He's missin', an' you want to find him. Well, well, nothin' would please me more than to help ye, but I don't know nothin' about it, and my nerves are all [unstrung by the loss of the Polly Ann—"

"I can see, but—"

"A sea captain's business is to keep his ship right side up on the ocean, an' as he does it or fails so is his business prosperous. The Polly Ann went to the bottom o' the ocean, an' it has harrered me up so I am that nervous I could bite anybody who speaks ter me. Don't misjudge me, miss."

"I should regret to worry you, captain."

"Thank ye, miss."

"And you ought to understand my own worry."

"I do, miss," glibly declared Hawk. "But don't you worry. I figure it out like this: Your father was in port and decided to sail on the Polly Ann. He set down an' wrote that letter, thinkin' he would go right on board, an' so he said he was already there, but, somehow, he changed his mind or missed us."

"That is my uncle's theory."

"And correct, too, miss, I make no doubt."

"But it does not explain why father has not written since."

"Now, miss, you wait a bit an' you'll hear all right, I do believe. Don't be cast down. The Polly Ann is at the bottom of the ocean, and the old gentleman didn't go down with her. That is sure."

"I will rid my mind of that fear, then, and hope on."

"Do it! It'll all turn out well."

The young lady seemed to be relieved of her fears in a measure, and as she prepared to go conversation became less pointed.

Steve Starr had listened to all, and he was considerably interested. He arrived at a certain conclusion.

"The girl doesn't want to rely too much on what the sailor tells her. If I read aright the fellow would rather lie than tell the truth. Still, it does not appear to be a very serious affair. I wonder who she is?"

It was an idle curiosity, and Steve did not dream of taking measures to learn her identity. As it was not, as far as could be seen, a matter which interested him in the lightest degree, professionally, he sat still when he heard her go out, and thus it ended for the time.

When he came in the detective had intended to rest for the night, but he felt in good condition, and his mind turned more and more to the drama connected with the Red Rover. He decided to go around to the pier and see if anything of importance was transpiring there.

Accordingly, he started.

He was nearing the pier when he saw coming toward him a man who bore a resemblance both to humanity and to an advertisement. He bore over his neck a divided sign, and as one of the halves which composed it was toward the detective the latter was enabled to read these words:

EAT TO LIVE!

AND EAT AT SMALL COST AT

J. Q. A. McSMITH'S RESTAURANT

No. — SOUTH ST.

Bearing down the street at a slow and easy pace, and displaying the sign with the ease of an old hand, the walking advertisement drew near Steve steadily.

"A 'sandwich man!'" murmured the detective, thoughtfully. "That is the kind of a person that the missing Pardon Gallup was. It isn't likely, but this may be the man I wish to find. I will see if he answers to the name."

He accosted the sandwich man.

"So you are from McSmith's?" he inquired.

"This sign is," amended the sandwich man.

"Is it a good place to eat?"

"Boss, it is, dead sure!"

"Have you eaten there long, yourself?"

"No longer than I be tall."

"Nonsense! Do you eat there?"

"I haven't yet, but you can see what it has done fer me jest ter carry this painted sandwich. Ain't I plump? An' what would the feed do to a man who eat the genuine sandwiches, instead o' signs?"

"Your logic is able, my man. What is your name?"

"Cicero Magillicuddy."

"Humph! Do you know a man in your business named Pardon Gallup?"

"Eh?"

"Pardon Gallup, I say."

"He's on the Island."

"For what?"

"Over-eating."

"Nonsense!"

"He eat up his advertisin' sandwich, ye see."

Even before this last absurdity Steve had been of the opinion that his companion was lying to him, and the fact that the alleged Mr. Magillicuddy was eying him very intently led the shrewd detective to ignore all else and reply:

"Well, if he's on the Island we need not talk more about him. If he ever gets out, however, he will hear of something of value to him by seeing me."

"What value?"

"Hard cash."

The sandwich man abruptly reached out, seized Steve's hand and shook the member warmly.

"Boss!" he exclaimed, "that puts an entirely different feature on the corpse. Cicero Magillicuddy disappears in thin smoke an' Pardon Gallup comes back from the Island. I ain't the first, but I be Gallup, hisself. I was only stringin' ye, first off, see?"

"You claim to be Pardon Gallup, eh?"

"I do, boss."

"Prove it!"

"How?"

"I want to know about a certain thing that which is known to Pardon Gallup. If you are he you can tell me."

"Sure, Mike! Anything Pardon knows I know. Money in it, did you say? Show me the dust an' you will see me corral it instanter."

"Can you drop your sandwich advertisement—"

"Sure, Mike!"

Pardon was about to throw off the sign wholly, but Steve checked him and directed:

"Let us proceed sensibly. There is a sailors' boarding-house near here where I have some influence, and if," glancing at the sign, "you will not injure the business of J. Q. A. McSmith too much, we will go in, sit down and talk at our ease."

"Say," warily asked Pardon, "you ain't a police spy be ycu?"

"No."

"Then I'm yer huckleberry!"

The last assertion might pass muster as current slang, but not in any other way, for Pardon Gallup did not resemble the luscious huckleberry in either sweetness or freshness. He had once been described to Steve as being like a tramp, and he certainly looked it.

He was of middle age, and his form was muscular and heavy, but he had not aided Nature by keeping up the good standard. He was not only ragged and dirty, but his face bore a week's crop of scraggly beard and numerous blotches, so that he presented an unprepossessing appearance. The wonder was that he was deemed fit for a "sandwich man," but in that locality lines are not closely drawn.

Steve escorted him to the sailors' boarding-house mentioned, and to a private room furnished by the keeper, who knew the detective well. Mr. Gallup suggested that he would like to sample a "ball," and when whisky had been brought for him he looked complaisant and happy.

"All ready?" asked Steve.

"I be boss. Heave ahead!"

"You know Trezzo Petresso and his daughter Carma, eh?"

"He's the Eyetalian who keeps the fruit-stand."

"Yes."

"I do know him."

"Lately, you told him about what you heard on the night when you slept on the wharf by the bark Red Rover."

"Eh? Eh?"

Pardon began to grow uneasy, but Steve waved his hand and added:

"Don't get wild. I want to inquire about a friend of mine. There is no earthly reason why you should ride a high horse."

Pardon's very small eyes seemed to grow still smaller as he bent his gaze on the questioner with renewed sharpness.

"Wal, what?" he asked.

"Tell me what happened there, that night."

"Why should I?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"I ain't no informer."

"Have you cause for fear?"

"No."

"Then why not speak out?"

Pardon Gallup was wary, and very much disinclined to talk, but Steve believed it was the instinctive caution of a vagabond, rather than the alarm of guilt. Proceeding on that line he endeavored to worm out the sandwich man, and was so successful that Pardon finally unbosomed himself fully.

"You shall have the pertic'lers," he promised. "Et was right in my way o' business, an' thusly: That night I was down on my luck an' minus even a ten-center, after I had took my evenin' drink. Nobody seemed ter want to advertise, an' there was no signs ter be carried. I am ambitious, an' want ter rise in the world, but when no biz don't show up I can't raise no 'mon.' See?"

"Yes. Proceed."

"No 'mon' was out that eve, but I got inter one game, ef not another. Yer information is correct. Et did happen."

"What?"

"Why, the murder on the Red Rover!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NIGHT TRAGEDY.

PARDON GALLUP had abandoned his air of caution, and the detective felt sure that he was now to hear everything the sandwich man could tell. He encouraged him afresh, and Pardon went on:

"It was like this: Having no money that eve I decided to skirmish fer my downy bed—a thing by no means new ter me. I went down on the piers an' looked around, an' I finally brought up by a bark which lay in a dock.

"All was so still there that my first notion was that I could get onto the deck an' take my snooze, but when I got there I found that a box lay close ter the vessel. Et must hev been a hen-coop, jedgin' by the make of it, an' one side had slats, instead of a close line o' boards.

"Says I ter myself, 'Pardon, this is your mutton!' an' I jest crawled inter it, right quick. I fixed et so et was the open side down, an' the slatted side next ter the bark. This was so I could hear the first sign of alarm, ef anybody went ter drive me out.

"Et was a prime place, though I had ter double myself up like a corkscrew ter fit, but I didn't mind that. Et was right nice, too, ter hear the water kissin' the side o' the vessel, an' smell the salt o' the sea.

"Wal, I got sleepy an' was about ter drop off when a *coupe* drove down on the pier an' some folds got out an' went inter the bark."

Here Steve interrupted:

"Who were they?"

"I wasn't where I could see, exactly," replied Pardon, "but this I do know—there was a young lady along."

"Describe her!"

"Can't do et, only I know she was youngish, and had on fine clothes. I should say she was just a corker, boss."

"Do you mean dashing of appearance?"

"Sure, Mike!"

"Blonde or—"

"I tell ye straight I don't know. I had ter peek out o' the box, an' the view was so cross-eyed that I could git only a vague sight o' her. See?"

"Go on!"

"The whole gang, be they two, three or four—I thought I didn't care ter know their numbers, an' I kin only say there was at least one man—they went on board. There was a brief little stir on deck, an' then I knew they had gone down inter the cabin.

"Even then I thought et was nothing that concerned me, an' was jest sinkin' off inter sleep ag'in when voices grew right near ter me, an' I knowed somebody had come inter the part o' the bark nearest me, cabin or otherwise.

"They was talkin' quick an' eager, but I was that mad because they was disturbin' of my rest that I tried ter shut out what they said. I was pretty successful until their voices rose louder an' I knew they was quarrelin', an' then I sorter had ter take et in whether I would or not."

Again the detective interrupted:

"What did they say?"

"I can't tell much of it, word for word," replied the sandwich man. "Et seems one o' the lot—a man—was refusing ter do something the others asked him ter do, an' the argument was hot on that point. I tell ye the simple truth when I say I didn't get onto the facts no more than that."

"Think again! If you could give me the slightest clue—"

"But I can't."

"How many took part in the talk?"

"At least two men and the woman."

"Go on!"

"I kept on tryin' ter shut et all out an' go ter sleep, an' I lost much that I might hev heard. I gave no special attention until I heard the quarrel turn inter a scrap. Yes, boss, they left off talkin' an' begun ter fight."

"And what then?"

"They rattled round over the cabin until et was settled. Then et was, bein' all waked up, that I heard some words plain.

"You have killed him!" cried a man's voice.

"Good!" says the woman.

"But it will bring us to the rope!" says the timid man.

"Not unless we are fools enough to hev et so," says the second man. "All we hev ter do is ter dump him inter the drink."

"And then our secret will be safe," says the woman.

"Yes; no more trouble ter be feared from the mystery of the Red Rover," says the bold man, cheerfully.

"Little did I think when I agreed to the first plot," says the timid man, "what would happen when we got inter port."

"Shut yer jaw!" says the woman, sharp-like; "have you lost all yer nerve? When we entered inter this game we did et fer big money, an' nothin' shall stop us. What if this carrion is dead? Dump him in the dock an' et will all be over."

"Her voice had been mighty sharp," added Pardon Gallup, "an' the timid man put in his plea fer more quiet. He was listened to, that time, an' I didn't hear no more."

"Did you see nothing?" asked Steve.

"I mean that I heard no more talk. But I did hear the body dropped inter the dock after some minutes. Seems they fixed et ter suit them, an' then slung et over oard. I heard et fall ker-chug, an' then there was no more."

"I was so scared I was a good mind ter run away, but I decided ter stick to. Et is unlucky fer you, boss, that when the party come off I was so anxious ter keep out o' the fuss that I jest laid low an' made no attempt ter see them go."

The sandwich man ceased to speak.

"Is that all?" asked Steve.

"Yes."

"Think again! The slightest particular will be of interest to me."

"Sorry, but I kin tell no more."

"Are you certain they said they had entered the game for 'big money'?"

"Sure, Mike!"

"What did you understand by that?"

"Nothin'! I had no earthly clue to et."

Pardon Gallup was done. Steve questioned him closely for some time, but failed to extract anything of value whatever. The sandwich man was very frank, and seemed to be telling the whole truth, but he had told all he could.

When this fact was fully established the

detective paid him for his news, and so liberally that Pardon declared he would be Steve's "slave" all his life. He asked permission to come around and see the detective now and then, and the latter was not reluctant.

They finally went out of the private room, and to that frequented by the sailors who were stopping in the house. Most of them were men who were living in idleness while waiting for a chance to ship, but they were a jolly lot, that evening, and cards and grog were receiving due attention.

It was a mutual surprise when Steve saw Hick Peters.

Dismissing the sandwich man the detective sat down with Hick and told him all he had learned.

"Now," inquired Steve, "how can all this fuss have been made over Ben Bipps?"

"Give et up!" agreed Hick.

"If he was a mere humble sailor, why should he be so dangerous to those who killed him?"

Hick shook his head.

"Jack Tar," added Steve, "I say of this matter what I said at the start, that there is more in it than the adventures of a humble sailor."

"It does look that way."

"The mysterious woman said they were 'in the game' for 'big money.' Now, what did she mean?"

"Couldn't have referred ter Ben Bipps, fer he had none. We left Calcutta, the last voyage, with a good cargo o' indigo, spices an' opium, but et had all been taken off afore then, and there wa'n't no wealth whatever on board the old Red Rover."

"Then where does the 'big money' come in?"

"I give et up!"

At this point an acquaintance of Hick's claimed his attention, and, as Steve did not know that he had anything more to say, he took up a newspaper and began to read. He did not notice that it was a week old, but age did not mar its elements of interest. Almost the first thing he saw was this article:

"News has been received of the loss of the bark Polly Ann. Being disabled in a storm she went down in mid-ocean, sinking with her cargo, though all of the crew were saved. The Polly Ann was a bark of long service, though deemed perfectly seaworthy. She was owned by Tereston Brothers & Brockway, of New York, and by them used in the East Indian trade. She left Calcutta on the fatal voyage with a cargo of opium, indigo and spices, and was commanded by Captain Hawk."

Keen interest was in Steve's face. He did not need the last name in the article to enlighten him on one point—he was quick to remember that it was the bark Polly Ann that he heard mentioned in the room of the hotel by the seafaring man and the lady visitor.

Now, he had stumbled on one branch of their conversation, and it was suggestive in what it vaguely held before the imagination as well as what was known to be true. He called Hick, as soon as the latter was at liberty.

"Did you ever hear of the bark Polly Ann?" Steve inquired.

"The name is a bit familiar, but I can't place it."

"What did you say your cargo was, on the last trip?"

"Indigo, spices and opium."

"And you were from Calcutta?"

"Yes."

"Read this article!"

Hick read, and then looked up with an expression of mild surprise.

"In the same trade as ours, wasn't she?" he commented.

"Yes."

"Do you make anything more out of it?"

"I don't know whether I do or not," replied Steve. "It is odd that the Polly Ann has been put before my eyes as she has, and more than that, odd that she was from the same port and with the same cargo as the Red Rover. Of course it does not seem to be more than a coincidence, but I wished to ask if you knew of the Polly Ann?"

"I shall have to give it up."

"Well, Hick, when you see me next I

shall have ceased to be Robert Stephen Starr. I shall have on the plainest of clothes, and, maybe, carry a stevedore's hook in my hand, though I do not intend to do any real work in that line unless I am compelled to in order to get the points we wish. How that will be time alone can tell, but I am going to enter this case seriously, and to-morrow 'Stevedore Steve re-enters public life.'"

CHAPTER IX.

THE RACE-COURSE QUEEN.

The following day Steve Starr kept his promise and spent his time in the company of stevedores who were out of a job, as well as in giving some attention to those who were at work. The talk between Captain Thomes and Mrs. Blanche Armstrong indicated that certain men of that trade had been bribed to keep a guilty secret, and the detective wished to find the men who had been bought up.

He found nothing on the trip, however.

At night he discarded his common clothes and went back to the hotel where he had regularly lodged. When he entered the dining-room he looked around to see if he could see any sign of Captain Hawk, but the mariner was not there.

It was a disappointment, for Steve had decided to make Hawk's acquaintance and see what would come of it.

On leaving the dining-room his course was near the clerk's desk, and at the moment of passing he heard the clerk give an order:

"Show the gentleman to No. 34."

The gentleman in the case was a newcomer, but, while he did not interest Steve, something else did. Number 34 had been occupied by Captain Hawk. Why was it to let to another, now?

As soon as the register was at liberty Steve examined it, himself. Opposite the last entry of Hawk's name he found the word, "Paid."

He spoke to the clerk.

"Where is Captain Hawk?"

"He settled up, to-day, and left us."

"For how long?"

"Permanently, I suppose."

"Where did he go?"

"He did not say. I have no knowledge of him; I merely know he is gone."

Steve turned away, but his face bore a look of both disappointment and comprehension. The chance to make Hawk's acquaintance seemed to be gone, like Hawk, himself. And Steve believed he understood why Hawk had so abruptly left the hotel.

Was it not to avoid the young lady who had called on him?

"She was right when she accused him of keeping something back," thought the detective. "Whatever the secret is he wants to keep it inviolate, and he has skipped to avoid her. It seems that the Polly Ann has its secret, like the Red Rover. Pity I do not know who the young lady was, or I would call and see if she could give me any light."

Lacking this clue, Steve did the next best thing and went to bed.

On the following day he was again around among the stevedores most of the time until noon, but, shortly after taking his dinner, he had an encounter. On Whitehall street he suddenly saw Captain Hawk.

He was not at once seen, and, acting on a sudden impulse, he then took pains not to be seen at all. He kept out of sight.

"It will do no harm to shadow the fellow a bit," he decided. "I will see what he is doing with himself."

It was not hard to shadow Hawk, but the result was rather surprising. The captain left town, and the patient watcher was carried by the pursuit to the Guttenburg race-course.

This brought a feeling of disappointment, for it seemed that Hawk had merely come to kill time, and the idea was increased when Steve saw the mariner stand around with all the appearance of one who saw such a scene for the first time. Hawk was elbowed and pushed by the crowd, and he endured it with a look of distress which was impressive. He made no effort to bet, and did not act like one seeking for anything in particular.

"I have had my labor for nothing, unless I seek to renew his acquaintance right here," thought Steve. "Shall I do it?"

The captain was at a standstill in a crowd which annoyed him more than ever, and Steve's roving gaze suddenly detected something else.

"Ha!"

The exclamation impulsively passed his lips, and it was not strange. Not far away he had discovered a woman who held his attention from the moment it was first attracted.

She was one of the most pronounced beauties of the track, and men who liked show in facial and other respects might well have worshiped at such a shrine. A striking face it was, and all the more so because it had a rich red color which owed nothing to the tricks of embellishment mis-called art, and with the resplendent dress which accompanied it she was, indeed, a bird of rare plumage.

She sat in a carriage and was the center of an admiring group of men, some of whom were near enough to hear her speak, while others were content to stand as close as they could and simply look on her as on an idol.

A veritable queen of the track she was, but it was not that which affected Steve Starr so much.

He had recognized Mrs. Blanche Armstrong.

While the sight stirred him anew he was not much surprised. The ex-janitor, Mullen, had told that he suspected she frequented the races, and he was in a degree prepared for it, but the sight moved him not a little.

"Versatile woman!" he muttered. "Assignee of the Red Rover's cargo, and gambler. Prosaic business and the mad intoxication of the track! The two callings do not seem to harmonize. I wonder if I can learn more of her?"

He made his way to the verge of the admiring group and accosted a wasp-waisted youth whose wide-open eyes and mouth told of adoration.

"May I ask," inquired Steve, "who that beautiful woman is?"

The youth turned a supercilious glance upon him.

"Aw! don't yer know?" he demanded.

"I admit that I do not."

"You must have come from the woods."

"I am a very busy man who seldom gets a chance to come here."

"I should say not. There are but few men of blood who don't know Lady Blanche, you know."

"Blanche who?"

"Lady Blanche."

"But her last name?"

"Nobody knows; it's just Lady Blanche."

"Oh! Plays the races, does she?"

"Well, by Georgel you be green! Naw, she don't play them in the way you mean. She gives tips."

"To whom?"

"Anybody who has the stuff to pay for for them. See?"

"A female seller of tips?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"I know of no reason why she should not do that act as well as men. She's a good looker."

"Most beautiful woman in New York, don't you know?"

"Where does she hang out?"

The wasp-waisted youth gave the address. It was not that place where Mrs. Blanche Armstrong had her flat.

"Can any one go there and buy tips?"

"Of course. By Jove! you must be green."

"One more question. Does nobody know her full name?"

"Probably she does herself," replied the youth, with exquisite wit, "but I reckon she is the only one. Better go to her for the information!"

The youth turned his back on his questioner with the air of one shaking off a bore, and Steve let him alone. Like the youth, he wished to gaze on Lady Blanche.

Steve had grown decidedly interested. The consignee of the Red Rover's cargo had become of striking importance. At the very least she was a woman of rapid life. There was secrecy about her, too. At the place where she gave "tips" she did not

give her full name; she was merely "Lady Blanche."

She had her under-current life, and kept the secret well.

The detective looked further. She had her admirers all around her, but there was one who seemed, on this occasion, to be more favored than the others. He sat in the vehicle with her. He was a man with a round, almost boyish face, though it was clear, in certain ways, that he had left boyhood well behind.

At times this face beamed with good-humor, but, now and then, he looked at the other worshipers of the goddess and did not seem so well pleased.

Steve let Captain Hawk go his way and gave heed only to Lady Blanche, and, though he saw no more than what might be seen any day at the races where a handsome woman is interested in the sport, he was well occupied in watching her.

He was repaid. When the various races were on she was all excitement; when there was a lull she blazed forth as the queen of the track, and her conversation evidently thrilled her worshipers.

More than once the detective shrugged his shoulders.

"A woman in mercantile life, eh?—in a calling where steady nerves and a cool head are needed. Lady Blanche, either you are singularly versatile, or you will bear watching."

The pastime of the day was over, at last, and the crowds dispersed. Determined not to lose sight of the female gambler, Steve paid a goodly price for the use of a cab and was enabled to follow her all the way home. She went to the house where she gave "tips." Her companion entered with her, but remained only half an hour.

Shortly after he left she, too, came out, and Steve followed her to the flat where she was simply Mrs. Armstrong.

"A woman of double life," he thought. "Where do I learn more of her?"

CHAPTER X.

THE LIFE-SEEKERS.

WHEN Steve Starr left the vicinity where Mrs. Armstrong lived, he went direct to a boarding-house on South street, which was patronized chiefly by stevedores who had not yet taken life companions, and thus had to depend on such homes.

It was a building which had outlived its original sphere of usefulness, but that was nothing new for South street, where age is seen in almost all structures. This house had a sailors' boarding-house on either side, and some of the seafarers now and then drifted over the line and mixed with the stevedores, though such was not the rule.

When Steve took a room there, he had pleaded that he was out of work, and could not go to the expense of a regular fare, so he really could go and come as he chose, though his actual motives were not known.

When he came in, on this occasion, he found several of the stevedores engaged in smoking and drinking beer, and with them was Hick Peters. The sailor's face brightened at sight of his ally, and he took occasion to say privately;

"I come to see you?"

"Why?"

"I'm done with the Red Rover."

"You are? Why?"

"Captain Thomes an' me had a little set-to ter-day, an' he got so fresh that I knocked him down. I hadn't signed fer the next voyage—whenever that's to be—so I jest took my kit off the bark an' come here."

"That's bad."

"Why?"

"I had been thinking I might need you on the Red Rover."

"Wal, I'm done anyhow. Couldn't stand it."

"What was the trouble?"

"Messmate, I'm downed jest because I was Ben Bipps's chum."

"Do you think so?"

"Sure!"

"Then there must be a grudge aganst you."

"They are afraid."

"Of you?"

"Yes."

"Why should they be?"

"Simply because they have done Ben Bipps up, an' they're afraid I will git them inter trouble. Ever sence Ben was killed, they have been pickin' on me, an' things got so canterkerous that I couldn't stand it, by thunder! The Old Man seemed ter think I was his dog, an' he tried ter make a slave of me. Would you endure that? J reckon not. Anyhow, I didn't; I jest knocked him down an' skipped."

Hick was very much put out, but further details seemed to confirm his claim that he had been made the object of petty persecutions. Steve was not ready to believe it was because Ben Bipps had been killed, for, believing that the mystery of the Red Rover reached further than any common sailor, he was not sure that Ben Bipps was dead; but it did seem that the persecutions were the result of Hick's friendship for a man who had disappeared so singularly that it was possible that he had been mixed up in the mystery of the bark.

Thus, Steve and Hick were agreed that he had the mystery to thank for his misfortunes.

"It'll all come out right, though," added Hick. "I'm too capable a seaman to want for a job long, an' I'm not sorry to shake old Thomes; but I don't leave New York until we make a good try to find out all concernin' this matter."

"You shall be my right-hand man."

"Messmate, put it there!"

And Hick gave Steve's hand a most friendly pressure as the compact was sealed.

Hick had been assigned to a room next to the detective's, by chance, and when they retired they decided to leave the connecting door open, as the night was unpleasantly warm.

They retired, and were soon asleep.

Steve's life had been one of so much adventure in his profession that he had acquired the habit of being ever on the alert, even in sleep, and, like a borderman, he awoke at the slightest sound.

On this night he fell into the soundest of slumber, and there was nothing to alarm him for several hours. The house was quiet, and it seemed that the real stevedores were resting as peacefully as the detective counterfeited.

Two o'clock!

Steve awoke.

Silence and darkness were around him, and there was nothing moving as far as he could hear, yet he had the feeling that something ominous had aroused him. What was it? He listened without stirring, but nothing was to be heard.

Nothing? Well might it be said of the first minutes that passed, but, suddenly, a voice sounded so distinctly that he was startled.

"Why don't the fool bring the board?"

It was a question as singular and trivial, it seemed, as it was unexpected, but it had an element of interest. It had come from the frail balcony outside Steve's window. His mind quickly framed the question: Who was there, and what was desired of a board?

Incomprehensible mystery!

He heard the answer to the spoken inquiry:

"It will be here directly."

"An' we shall be seen from the street."

"Et is deep shadder here, as we noticed before."

"Still we may be seen."

"You are gettin' nervous."

"I be. I want the job done and over with."

"Why don't you take counsel in coolness from them who did the job on the bark?"

"Thunder! I'd like ter let them do this, an' have my part confined ter swearin' secrecy, as we did then."

Stevedore Steve scarcely dared to breathe. All this was not only suggestive of crime and violence, but the reference contained in the last few sentences was very striking.

Had he found the stevedores who had been mentioned by the persons in the cabin of the Red Rover? If so, he seemed close to the secret he longed to arrive at. He slipped quietly out of bed and went near the window, taking care that he was not discovered.

"It will pay us to do up the two men—

pay a good bit better than service at our trade as stevedores—an' I am ready to do this job," added the bolder of the men on the balcony.

"Why need the stevedore in this room be killed, ef it's the sailor that is wanted?" asked the second man.

"The two are so thick that they think Hick may confide in his stevedore friend."

"And so Steve must go, too?"

"Yes."

"Hard lines!"

"What do we care? The job brings us cash."

"When we have succeeded in doin' them up."

"It will all be over soon after that board is brought so we can get to the other balcony. It won't worry me to do them up."

It was interesting conversation to Steve Starr. He could not fail to understand it. Outside the window were the men who had gained some clue to the secret of the bark, and now they had been hired to kill him and Hick—to invade their rooms at night, and dispose of them as coolly as if they were kittens.

The scheme was a vile one, but the detective gave it but brief thought. He was warned, and that meant a good deal.

"Let them get the board and enter," he muttered. "Hick and I can care for them, and we'll nab them and the secret at the same time!"

It was not hard to understand what was wanted of the board, from the stevedore's point of view. The two rooms each had a balcony, but they were separated by an open space, and it was the plan to bridge the gap by laying the board from one to the other.

Evidently, they expected to enter Hick's room first, and all seemed favorable for the plot.

Steve had seen enough, and he turned to enter Hick's room and waken him quietly. As he did so there was a peculiar sharp, cracking sound outside the window, followed by a rending noise—a cry of alarm, and then a period of stillness.

The detective stopped short.

"What was that?"

The question flashed through his mind, but it was quickly answered. He heard a sodden noise well below, and his first suspicion received confirmation.

"The balcony has broken and let them down!"

With this idea on his mind he ran to the window and, regardless of all risks, looked out.

The men had disappeared, and with them the balcony.

He put his head out more fully and gazed toward the street-level. There he could plainly see the twain sprawling on the sidewalk, and it needed no genius to understand one fact. The fall had been a long one, and if they had escaped death they were very lucky. The breaking of the balcony had let them down without the least check to their descent.

"By Jove!" muttered Steve, "this is an unexpected ending to the scheme of murder. What is to be done now?"

CHAPTER XI.

PLAIN SIGNS OF DANGER.

ABOUT the house all remained silent, but the occurrence was not to pass without ready attention. A patrolman came hastening along the street, evidently drawn by the sound of the fall, and Stevedore Steve drew his head in.

He did not want to be seen gazing down when the officer arrived.

The latter came up quickly and bent over the fallen men. Steve heard him speak to them, but there was no reply. The officer looked up and then went to the door and began to knock loudly.

"He will alarm the place," mused the detective. "What am I to say? I won't admit I heard any talk, for it would waken the alertness of the enemy who remain. Better that I play a cautious game. The balcony made considerable noise when it fell, and I can't safely say I did not hear it. I will be slow to act, though."

The knocking at the door had grown so loud that it produced results. Some one

was opening to the patrolman, and Steve no longer hesitated to put his head out.

The door opened.

"What's happened here?" demanded the patrolman.

"What do you mean?"

The question was in the voice of the keeper of the boarding-house, and it seemed that of an innocent person.

"Two men, dead, or nearly so, lie here. How did they come to be where they are?"

"I don't know."

"Looks as if they fell from above."

"Have any of the fools been trying to sleep on the roof?"

Whether the question was frank or not it was natural, for the habit of sleeping on the roof in hot weather was not a new one to the poor people of the city.

"Come and see if they are any of your people."

The keeper went out, and he was not long in arriving at a discovery. Wonderingly he exclaimed:

"They are Eph Meeks and Pat Casey."

"Boarders of yours?"

"Yes; stevedores."

"Well, they have got bad hurts—their last, I guess, and you want to do something about it. I'll ring for an ambulance, and we'll also take a look in here and see what caused all this."

"They are not dead."

"Pretty near it, and clean knocked out by the fall."

Another officer appeared in the distance, and the first one rapped for his help. An ambulance was sent for, and then they addressed the keeper again:

"Did they have a room just above?"

"No."

"Do you see that balcony hanging by one leg, as it were?"

"Yes; and that is what puzzles me. They had no room near there, and had no reason for being on the balcony. I don't see into it."

"What kind of fellows were they?"

"Rough stevedores, but honest, as far as I ever knew."

"Do you suspect they were on a robbery break?"

"I did not say so. No, they surely could not have been that. Blessed little any one would find in this house to steal. Pshaw! they can't have been trying to do robbery. Maybe, they went out to get air on the balcony. We are pretty free and easy about going around the premises, here."

It looked as if the keeper wanted to preserve the reputation of his house, but he was unheeded.

"Show us up to the room outside of which hangs the broken balcony," directed the officer.

Steve saw he would have to meet the crowd, so he settled down to it coolly, and in a short time there was a knock at his door. He was not known to either of the officers, and was questioned as if he was what he assumed to be, a stevedore, himself.

He told the story as he had planned, and said he had been sleeping when he was awakened by the cracking of the balcony. This left him evidently a wholly useless witness, and he was not troubled with many more questions.

The patrolmen looked the premises over in part, learned just where the injured men belonged, when in their own room, and arrived at a decision. It was that they had gone out on the frail support to get air, and had been sent to their death by the breaking of the supports.

This decision pleased Steve, but he was well aware that it might be changed when more astute officers took charge.

Anyhow, he was glad to have matters take the course they had, for it gave him a reprieve, and he did not want to come too prominently to the front.

When all had gone away he had a chance to talk with Hick Peters, who, of course, had been awakened by this visit, and duly questioned. To him the detective told all, and Hick wagged his bushy head solemnly.

"A mighty close call!" he declared.

"It was, for they meant to kill you and me."

"Sure."

"I don't see but we have come out of it all right."

"No mate, don't it give you an idee?"

"What do you mean?"

"There was more than them two inter it, as their talk in your hearin' proves. We had been marked for the slaughter, an' we ain't seen the end o' et, yet. Them who live will be after us ag'in."

"That is right. We shall have to keep an eye open."

"Et won't be pleasant, either. Some might revel in et, but not me. Why, et sends the cold shivers up an' down my spiral columb. Think of it!—ter go an' come, aware that at any minute they may pounce on us in the dark an' do us up with knife or revolver. When a killer sets out ter do a job he don't give up easy. We shall go as marked men, an' the blow may fall at any time."

Hick spoke seriously, but it was not the comment of a coward. He had seen too much of wild life to be scared, now, but he realized the danger well.

"Your ideas are correct, Hick, but we have due warning. The only dark place is, who leads this attack?"

"Captain 'Thomes, the woman in the case, an' that gang."

"So I argue. They have hired the stevedores to do the job. We know, too, that some of the gang remain active. He who had gone for the board may seek a revolver now."

"Let him come open, man-fashion, an' I ain't afraid o' the whole lot o' them!" cried Hick.

"We must study out who the rest are. If we do that we may learn not only who our foes are that remain, but, possibly, who the rest of the stevedores are who are sworn to silence by the plotters of the bark."

"Correct, an' we will look. But how?"

"Watch sharply in the morning, and, also, learn who associated most with those who fell to their hurt, to-night."

Hick caught at the plan, and the two talked for some time longer before they went to bed. In the morning they were early in the room where the stevedores gathered, and as the news of the accident of the night was told about they surveyed those who took the story in. They did not, however, see any one who seemed to carry a guilty secret.

Several times they heard mention made of one "Mike," and wonder expressed that he was not up. Suddenly the name was called out in a different tone, and a big stevedore entered from the outer door.

"Been to see the boys, Mike?" demanded one of the previous speakers.

"How's that?" growled Mike.

"Been to see Eph an' Pat?"

"What are you givin' us?" snapped the stevedore.

"Don't you know they are hurt?"

"Hurted? No. What is it?"

"They fell out o' a winder."

"Stuff!"

"They did, sure."

"Wal, that's pretty biz fer them. How was it?"

"How can you be unknowin' to et?"

"I went out last night an' didn't come in until now."

"Why, I seen you go ter bed."

"That's a lie!"

Mike was an ugly-looking fellow at all times, and he now knit his heavy brows into a ferocious scowl and glared at the man who was doing the other half of the talking. He looked positively murderous, and Hick touched Steve and shook his head.

"He's our mutton, an' he's a bad one!" murmured the sailor.

The detective's belief coincided with that of his ally, and it grew even more positive when Mike bluffed his fellow stevedore into retracting that he had seen him go to bed. Mike asserted that he had been out all night, and he was allowed to have it so. It was clear that he was a desperate person, and did not allow anybody to cross him.

He expressed regret that Pat and Eph had been injured, but did not seem much moved with sympathy, after all.

Now and then he shot a sly glance toward Hick and Steve, and they had no difficulty in understanding why, but they remained innocent of look and let him have no clue to their suspicions. When the stevedores went to their work, however, Hick whispered to the detective:

"He's the man we have got ter look out fer!"

"That is right," Steve agreed.

"Our lives are hunted, an' by a bad old chap, too. Look out fer him!"

"I think we shall be able to look out for Mr. Mike, but he is not all. We still lack due information as to the parties who are engineering this thing in full, and we may get done up by some mischance. Now, we must have information as to the condition of those who fell from the balcony, and I will see a detective friend and get him to investigate in due form."

This was done, and the report came in as soon as was to be expected.

Both men were unconscious at the hospital, and liable to remain so for some time, if, indeed they ever recovered from their injuries.

Nothing more was being done by those who had the case in charge. Absurd as it seemed to Steve, the idea had been accepted that they had gone out on the balcony to get the air, and had fallen, without more of a mystery about it.

"But Mike ain't fell!" remarked Hick, significantly.

"No. We shall hear from him."

"I don't mean ter go as Ben Bipps did."

"You still make him the central figure in the case, do you?" asked Steve, slowly.

"Yes, why not?"

"Hick, we don't know half of this."

"What do you suspect?"

"A big plot."

"What kind?"

"I don't claim to know, but things are ripe for the work. I can't be in a dozen places at once, but I feel able to make discoveries from this time on. We go with hunted lives, but to victory!"

CHAPTER XII.

AN EVENTFUL MEETING.

AT one of the East River piers lay the ship Rose Addison. It was in charge of the first mate, the captain being ashore. Sailors on deck saw a pretty young lady come out on the pier. She advanced near the Rose Addison and asked questions that brought out the fact that the skipper was not on board, but the fact that the mate was there seemed just as satisfactory to her.

Having made her wishes known she was conducted below, and in the cabin she found the officer in charge.

Mr. Coles was a young man, and his whole soul was not bound up in nautical matters. He knew a pretty woman when he saw one, and he paid due homage to this especial one.

"I have called to see if you will answer certain questions I have to ask," she said.

"I shall be glad to do so," he replied.

"My name is Ionice Tereston."

"I am pleased to be of service to you, Miss Tereston."

"I think it was the Rose Addison that rescued the crew of the bark Polly Ann."

"Quite right, miss."

"Do you know where any of the crew now are?"

"Captain Hawk, of the Polly Ann, is now in the city—"

"I mean, of the ordinary seamen."

"I regret to say I do not know where they are."

"Not one of them?"

"No."

"All are gone from here, then?"

"Yes, most of them were transferred, soon after the rescue, to a vessel bound for Liverpool. A few came on here, but they left the Rose Addison at once, and I have no further information in regard to them. I should say that Captain Hawk would be able in to inform you—"

"Do not mention him!" cried Ionice, with emphasis.

"Excuse me, miss."

"I want to find one of them, anyhow, but if it cannot be done I will avail myself of your offer to answer me, and ask of you. Did you see all who were rescued?"

"I did."

"Were there any passengers?"

"No."

"Only the sailors?"

"That is all."

"Are you sure?"

"In one sense, no; but all were clothed like sailors, and they appeared to be such."

"Was there any old gentleman?"

"None whatever. I am sure of that."

"Did you hear anything dropped by the rescued ones to indicate that such a gentleman was lost?"

"On the contrary they distinctly stated that not a life was lost," replied the mate.

Ionice was silent. Her face bore a puzzled expression. She had hoped that something would come out of this visit to the Rose Addison that would give her light, but now the mate asserted that no old gentleman was on board the vessel among the rescued, and he had been told that no one had been lost before the rescue. Then what had become of the lost member of the firm of Tereston Brothers & Brockway?

The mate was regarding her sympathetically, and she continued her questions. All the information she could think of she gathered thus, but when it was done she was none the wiser. There was not a sign of her lost father.

If she had accepted any of the explanations advanced by her uncle and Captain Hawk this would not have been so peculiar, but she believed she knew her father well enough to know he would not write from Calcutta that he was on board the Polly Ann if such had not been the case.

While talking with the mate she had noticed that persons were on the Rose Addison who seemed to be strangers looking the vessel over. There was nothing peculiar about that, and, though the mate observed the same thing, he did no more than to give a casual glance.

She was about to leave when the mate rose.

"Will you kindly excuse me for a moment?" he asked. "I have a duty to attend to, and will then return. Will you wait for me?"

"If you wish."

"I will be gone but a second, Miss Tereston."

He passed out of the cabin. As he went he moved within a few feet of the strangers, but no word was spoken between them. He hastened off, whereupon one of the strangers came to the entrance to the cabin. He gazed inquisitively at Ionice.

His companion, who was a woman, touched his arm.

"Let us go on," she requested.

"One moment. I want to see the cabin."

He walked in, but took off his hat very politely.

"Excuse me, miss," he said to Ionice. "I trust we do not intrude. We were looking the vessel over, you see."

He had a fair, chubby, good humored face, and a manner so faultless that she saw no reason why she should snub him. She bowed as an answer, and he stood looking as if very curious about the cabin, but it was to be noticed that his glance strayed more often to Ionice than to any other thing in the place.

The woman with him stood balancing herself on one foot and moving restlessly. Her lips were compressed, and it was clear she did not like the situation. Observing this, Ionice thought:

"When they are gone, he will receive a lecture for lingering here when she objected."

It required no great judgment to see this. The woman was bestowing keen and curious glances upon Ionice, and as the latter was nearly as inquisitive, it developed into something akin to a war of glances.

Finally the man smiled deeper than ever.

"Pardon me, but do you belong on the craft, miss?"

"No, sir."

Ionice replied briefly and none too cordially, but he was not daunted. Insinuatingly he added:

"Your name appeared familiar to me. Tereston, Tereston! Have I not heard it before?"

There were genuine touches in the way of mental inquiry, as well as in words, but his female companion did not appear willing to let him satisfy his inquisitive mood.

"We have not done all our looking, Mr. Windham," she remarked, pointedly.

"I know it, Lady Blanche; I know it. A moment of delay will do no harm, however," perseveringly replied the man. "Again, pardon me, Miss Tereston, but your name sounds familiar."

"Indeed!"

Ionice was not disposed to satisfy this stranger in the least. She did not like his looks, and she liked his companion even less. Add to these facts that "Lady Blanche" gave evidence of discontent with the conversation between her associates, and it seemed best to Ionice that the talk should cease, even if she would under some circumstances have agreed to it, which was doubtful.

She looked anxious for the return of the mate, but he came not.

"I have not been long in New York this last time," Windham pursued, "and have met so few persons, that I am unable to believe it was a matter of the present visit. Have I seen you in the past?"

"I think not."

Ionice partially turned her head away, but he was persevering.

"My name is Asher Windham. Did you never hear it?"

"Never, I think."

"That is odd."

Asher knit his brows in a thoughtful frown, but the recollection would not come. The name was, or seemed to be, so familiar to him that he felt he must at some time have been introduced to her, and, if such was the case, he wanted to renew the acquaintance. He had admired the dashing beauty of Lady Blanche, but there was something far better, in his sight, in the fair, sweet face of Miss Tereston. Hardened man of the world that he was, he gave all of his best nature's admiration to Ionice and was eager to know her.

He resorted to artifice.

"I think I have met your brother," he added, suddenly.

"I have no brother."

Asher's face fell.

"Or a sister?"

"I have no sister."

"There is something," he persisted.

"Your name is very familiar, and I feel reluctant to miss learning the connection. If you will kindly accept my card—"

He held out the pasteboard, but Ionice had endured enough.

"You will please pardon me."

With this unmistakable rebuff she turned and walked to the extremity of the cabin. Then Lady Blanche flashed an angry glance to the admirer who was plainly wavering in his allegiance.

"I am going now," she announced, in a low but determined voice. "Do you accompany me or stay?"

Asher could not fail to understand the whole situation, and he was equal to it. With the greatest urbanity he replied:

"I go, most certainly." While he added, mentally: "Yes, but if I lose all sight of this divine creature it will be because I am a dotard!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A NAME IS ENCOUNTERED.

GALLANTLY Asher gave his arm to Lady Blanche, and they passed out of the cabin. Their way was to the deck, but he was on the alert and had something to do.

Reaching the deck he took in all that was in sight quickly, and was not slow to observe a lounge who did not have the dress of a sailor. Blandly he inquired:

"Will you excuse me for a moment, Lady Blanche?"

"Do you wish to return to the cabin?" tartly demanded the woman.

"Certainly not."

"In that case I would excuse you permanently, so you could satisfy your curiosity in full. As it is, I will wait for you here."

"Thank you."

Asher moved away, his face breaking into a smile as he reached a safe point.

"Jealous, by Jove!" he thought. "I have made an impression on the divinity of the race-course, but it comes just as a new divinity crosses my horizon. Odd, by my life, and odd how familiar that name is. I'll learn more of Miss Tereston, or die in the attempt. Sublime one, my heart is yours!"

He had reached the lounge, and his manner became business-like.

"Friend," he began abruptly, "do you want to make five dollars?"

"Do I?" returned the man. "You bet!"

"Then follow the young lady who is now in the cabin and see where she lives. Will you do it?"

"That I will."

"Can you do it secretly, so as not to get caught?"

"Sure!"

"Here is the money, but if you make a slop of the job I will beat your brains out!"

"I'm no slouch, an' you kin depend on me ter do the thing up on the right lines. I'll see where she goes ter, an' she won't be the wiser. You kin bet yer goat-skin gloves on that!"

"Good!"

Asher gave directions as to where he was to meet his agent, after the spying was over, and then walked away.

"It's a risk," he soliloquized. "This man has the stuff, and he may take a skip and never see me again. It must be done, though."

He returned to Lady Blanche. This time she could not reprove him, for she had not seen him in conversation with the agent, but she had not forgotten what had gone before.

It had not been important business which took them to the Rose Addison. Asher had continued to pay attention to the race-track queen, and she had not rebuffed him. It was when they were out on a practically aimless expedition that they had seen the craft and made effort to go on board simply for the sake of seeing it, as Blanche knew but little about nautical matters. She was not leaving in a happy mood, however, and as they strayed toward the street Windham found it out.

"Quite a trim craft," he remarked, for the sake of saying something.

"To which one do you refer?" asked Blanche, curtly.

"Why, the Rose Addison."

"Oh! I didn't know but you meant the other one."

"The other one?"

"The young woman you seemed so much inclined to worship."

"My dear Lady Blanche, you over-estimate my notice of her. It was merely that her name sounded so familiar to me that I took notice of her. She is one of the milk-and-water sort, and they have nothing to appeal to the man of the world."

"Does the worn-out race-horse despise the green grass of the pasture?" tersely retorted the woman.

"Am I a worn-out racer?"

"What else?"

"I may be a racer, but I am not yet stale."

"What else is a man of the world who has had his day?"

"I perceive that it is your object to be sarcastic, but we need not quarrel. Call me what you will, I am still your slave—"

"Then let that girl alone!"

"I will."

"Do so, or we part."

Business-like was the manner of the race-course queen, and sharp her utterance, but she had to deal with one her superior. If Asher could not convince her he could act his part well and keep his temper.

"I must stroke her fur the right way," he soliloquized; and he proceeded to make himself so agreeable that she did forget her resentment for the time.

They went to a restaurant and had lunch, and finally brought up at Lady Blanche's quarters, but Asher never lost sight of his main object. As soon as he could get away without exciting suspicion he did so, and then he hurried to the place where he was to meet his agent.

He found the man awaiting him.

"What luck?" he asked, quickly.

"Good!"

"Did you follow her home?"

"Yes."

"Where was it?"

The agent gave the street and number.

"Isn't that an aristocratic neighborhood?" asked Asher.

"You bet, and they are rich, too."

"They? Who?"

"I saw a grocer's boy close there, and I asked him who lived there. He said it was Benjamin Tereston, and that he was rich as mud. I didn't know that mud was always rich, but that's the way the boy said it. He must have told the truth, for all things looked that way."

"Did you learn more?"

"No."

Asher's object was gained, and he dismissed the agent and was left to himself again.

"Benjamin Tereston!" he murmured. "The first part is not familiar, but the word Tereston hovers oddly in my memory. Seems that I ought to grasp it, but I can't. Confound it! what is the connection? I wish I could gain it, for I may need to know before I make their acquaintance more fully."

While pursuing this line of thought the adventurer had unconsciously walked northward, a course which would take him toward the Tereston house, and when he realized the fact he did not stop.

"I will go on and see where my divinity lives," he thought.

He reached the vicinity and took due note of all that was there, but it was not much that he gained from the survey. He did not see any of the members of the family, and the walls of the house told him nothing. He did not waver in his purpose, however, and he finally decided to accost the patrolman on the beat.

This he did, and a friendly conversation was the result.

Gradually Asher worked around to the subject nearest his mind, and led the officer to speak of the rich men on the patrolman's beat. As each one was mentioned the adventurer asked questions which prefaced the investigation he had in store in regard to the one man who interested him.

Benjamin Tereston being referred to he carelessly inquired:

"Is he in business?"

"Yes. He's an importer."

"What line?"

"East India goods—spices, opium, or something of that sort."

"Ah! Man of a family?"

"As far as I know he is not married, but he has a niece staying with him at present—a very pretty girl."

"Ah!"

Asher looked down and meditated. Then he added:

"Deals in spices, you say?"

"To be exact, I think it is chiefly indigo, opium and spices, but of course I know of the business of those on my beat only in a casual way. I never take in more than drifts to me."

The policeman cast a glance down the block to where a handsome servant girl was just entering the Tereston residence, and if Asher had been less occupied with scheming he might have suspected how so much had "drifted" to the officer's notice.

He asked as many more questions as he dared before leaving, and then sauntered away. Entering a drug-store he purchased a cigar and then consulted the City Directory.

There he found the name of Benjamin Tereston, with the additional information that he was a "merchant and importer," together with his home and office address. Still further, there was the fact that he was a member of the firm of Tereston Brothers & Brockway.

Pursuing the search the adventurer learned that the "brother" in the case was Edmund Tereston.

When he read the name he started abruptly.

"Edmund Tereston!" he muttered.

Unconsciously his hand strayed to his forehead, as if to bring forth some idea.

"Jupiter!" he exclaimed.

A moment he paused, and then he closed the book with a bang and passed out of the store. Taking a car he made haste to get to his own quarters, where he began a search. First of all he looked on the ornamental match-box on the mantel, but, failing there, the hunt was carried further, though still unsuccessfully.

"Where in perdition is it?" he finally cried, in annoyance.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NOTE OF ALARM.

WHATEVER concerned Mr. Asher Windham he had expected to find it in the match-box, where he had put it, and the fact that it was missing proved, as he thought, that somebody had been tampering with his possessions.

"Confound these chambermaids!" he growled. "Nothing is sacred to them. In their wild frenzy to put a room to rights they will do more than a burglar could do. It's a wonder they leave the carpet on the floor."

All over the floor the adventurer looked, and then, disdaining the bell, he went out of the room in search of the offending chambermaid. He came back growling.

"Denies it all! Of course she does. A chambermaid would steal the sheets of one's bed if she took a notion that it would make the room look brighter, and then swear she never saw them."

Asher lighted a cigar and sat down to meditate.

"I am sure of the name!" he remarked, when he began.

He devoted a long time to the subject, and wound up with the assertion:

"Mr. Windham was a schemer, and if he was rash he had the merit of devotion to his subject. Thus, he evolved a plan of action in the present case, and when he went to bed he murmured:

"I will see him to-morrow."

In the morning he rose to carry out his plan. To do this he went to Benjamin Tereston's office, and as he had not been too hasty he found that gentleman in.

Asher saw all there was to be seen when he entered, and his plan was shaken by the evidences of prosperous trade, but he would not abandon it.

He was soon in the office, where he was urbanely received by Mr. Tereston. He presented his card, and the inscription was duly read.

"I dare say," began Asher, "that you never heard of me before."

"I never did," Tereston admitted.

"Naturally not, but I have a scheme to unfold which will, I hope, make us better acquainted."

"Indeed!"

Benjamin looked doubtful, but the visitor went on confidently.

"Would you object to improving your business, if you had a chance?"

"I do not think any one would do that."

"You deal in indigo, spices and opium, eh?"

"Yes."

"That is why I am here."

A shadow passed over Tereston's face.

"Indeed!"

"Suppose I could cheapen your goods to you?" added Asher.

"I do not think you can."

"But I am lately from Calcutta, the land of opium, spices and indigo."

Benjamin started, and an expression came into his face which was like that of startled apprehension.

"You are—from where?"

"Calcutta."

"Why do you mention the place?"

"Because it is the land of the things you deal in."

"You recently came from there?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I did not walk. No; I came on the good ship Flying Star. Investigation would show you that the ship does not ply between Calcutta and here, but comes from Brazil. That is simple; I do not mean that I sailed direct from Calcutta, but in a roundabout way. I was killing time, and cared but little how I did come, but the fact remains that I did come from the queen city of the East Indies."

Mr. Windham was at his ease, and very urbane of manner, but, for some reason, Benjamin did not share his feeling. On the contrary the merchant looked at the visitor as if he saw some one to be dreaded and feared. It was odd that simple talk about mercantile matters should thus affect the old merchant, but it did.

"Why do you tell me about this?" he asked, with some sharpness.

"So we can make money."

"How can we?"

"By cheaper purchases."

"How would that help you?"

"If I could cheapen things to you, would you not be willing to allow me a percentage?"

"If you can do all you say, why are you not in business, yourself?"

"I am not a business man."

"Then how can you do anything of the kind?"

"Because of wide acquaintance in Calcutta. I know about all the men of importance there, and, though not now in touch with your line, I could get so quickly. Thus, with my acquaintance and my influence, I could cheapen things a good deal."

Asher Windham was lying, and Tereston was shrewd enough to know it. Asher did not carry the looks of a business man. He had the appearance of a happy-go-lucky rolling stone, and it was ridiculous to think of him as anything else. Again, Tereston had been so long in business, himself, that he believed there were no ways known to the trade for making a success of the work which he had not found and employed.

Under any circumstances he would have declined to deal with an unknown thus, and there were, just then, circumstances which rendered the call ominous to the importer.

Owing to the matters mentioned he dared not, however, send Asher away contemptuously. He saw he must temporize.

"Explain yourself more fully," he requested.

The visitor did so, and he was listened to, he thought, attentively. He would have been surprised could he have read Tereston's mind.

By the time he had finished, Benjamin was ready to talk with him more to the point.

"Well, sir, you have presented things to me worthy of consideration, but you will see I cannot decide at once. I want time."

"Of course."

"You may call again in about three days."

"No sooner?"

"I can give no definite decision before then, but it is quite possible that I may send for you before then to consult. Possibly," added the importer, "I may wish to have you at my house for dinner."

Asher Windham was steeled by long experience in the art of hiding his feelings, but he could not do so wholly then. The prospective invitation was the reason, and the whole reason, for his appearance in such a role, and the seeming ease with which he was to attain his object was too much for absolute composure.

Nevertheless, he managed to keep fairly unconcerned, outwardly.

"Very well," he agreed. "I am at your service."

"Give me your address, and I may send for you very soon."

Asher wrote it down, and, after some further talk they separated. He left the office chuckling to himself.

"I think I see my way clear to meet the divine Miss Tereston once more, and under different circumstances than when on board the Rose Addison. Aha! I scent victory!"

At that moment Benjamin Tereston was pacing the office with every evidence of agitation.

"From Calcutta!" he muttered. "From there, and with talk of indigo, spices and opium. What does it mean? I must see Brockway."

The junior member of the house of Tereston Brothers & Brockway soon came in.

"What do you suppose has happened?" cried Benjamin.

"What?" asked Brockway.

"A man has been here who says he is from Calcutta, and with talk of spices, opium and indigo."

"The dickens he has!" exclaimed Brockway.

"Yes."

"What do you infer?"

"That somebody is suspicious."

"Was he a detective?"

"He did not look it."

"Tell me all about it."

Tereston did as directed, and his partner listened with close attention.

"I think him worthy of suspicion," added Benjamin.

"He is, surely."

"Or do our guilty minds conjure up shapes of dread?"

"If we bank on that hope we shall prove bigger fools than I think we are. This looks like a cunning scheme against us, though the actual end is hidden. I can discern but one way of dealing with the supposed danger."

"What is that?"

"To learn what this fellow is."

"How can we do it?"

Brockway took from his pocket a slip of paper.

"Some days since," he replied, "I foresaw that we might need a cunning officer to help us, and, knowing a man who was none too honest, I asked him if he could recommend such a detective. He gave me this card."

Brockway extended a bit of pasteboard, and Tereston read aloud:

"Robert S. Starr, Private Detective." I never heard of him, but if you think best, employ this man to help us."

CHAPTER XV.

A DETECTIVE IS WANTED.

PARTNER BROCKWAY would have been less ready to make the suggestion he did if he had known the spirit in which the name of Robert S. Starr had been presented to him. When he asked his acquaintance for the name of a detective the acquaintance had been less sincere than he was supposed to be. Brockway thought him a safe man and a friend. In point of fact he owed Brockway a grudge, and he had given, out of malevolence, the name of a detective against whom he knew there was no stain of dishonor.

Thus was Brockway deceived.

Tereston looked again at the card and added:

"But is it really necessary to have a detective?"

"Such a man can quickly learn what we should be a long while in getting at."

"But he might betray us."

"Suppose we give him no chance?"

"How can we avoid it?"

"All we ask of him will be that he learns what this ominous visitor of yours really is."

"Oh! I see."

"We shall confide nothing in our detective."

"Good! Go on!"

"Suppose you see him."

"I will, if you wish."

"Do so, then."

Benjamin drew paper and ink toward him and hurriedly penned a note asking Robert S. Starr to call on him at once. This he sent away by special messenger.

"You want to cast off that gloomy face before the man gets here," observed Brockway.

"Do I look gloomy?"

"Like a grave-yard."

"Who could help it, situated as we are?"

"Do I look that way?"

"You are younger than I, and can bear up better. At my age I had no right to"—Tereston hesitated, and then abruptly finished—"do what we have done."

"Do you weaken?"

"My fears grow stronger, and with their strength I believe I do weaken. I fear discovery."

"Nonsense! All will be plain sailing."

"I hope so, but I wish we had not done it."

"It" was something of no small importance, it seemed. The misdemeanor, or crime, to which they gave no name in this conversation, appeared to be enough to put both on their guard, whether it worried both or not. And it was certainly odd that they talked about it without once giving clue to the nature of the offense. The shadow of some wrong act stalked ghost-like by their side, poisoning their minds and killing their happiness.

What was the mysterious crime?

Robert S. Starr answered the call sooner than was expected. Before he came, however, Brockway had gone out on an errand, and he did not see the detective at all. Starr had answered, but he came prepared to refuse the work he inferred was to be his by the taking. He had enough to at-

tend to already, but it was his practice to treat all with polite notice.

He introduced himself with an air which pleased Tereston.

"I have sent for you on business," explained the importer.

"Of what nature?"

"In the line of your profession. It will, I think, take you but a short time, and I will pay you well."

"A short job, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then I may be able to attend to it."

"Very well, Mr. Starr. It is simply to investigate a certain man, and see what he is. I want information of him—of his rank in life, calling, character, and so forth."

"Who is he?"

"Here is his card."

Tereston passed over the pasteboard given to him by Asher Windham, and the detective read what was thereon.

"This man," added the importer, "was a stranger to me until he lately called on me and excited my curiosity by his language. I want to know more of him, of his business, and so on."

The detective handled the card thoughtfully.

"Possibly I can do what you wish. I am pretty thoroughly occupied just now, but I will give attention to it. Should I find it will take more time than I can spare I will drop it in favor of anybody you may select, but I think I can do what you wish. What kind of a man do you take him to be?"

"An adventurer. More than that I do not know."

"What does he claim to be?"

"A man recently from a foreign country, and one who had a business proposition to make when he came to me. I do not believe him or his proposition to be sincere. Men in my position," added the importer, "have to be careful in business matters. If he is sincere he might be able to help me, but if he is not, I want to know it."

"I see. Where does he claim to hail from?—what foreign country, I mean?"

Tereston hesitated.

"Is that essential?"

"Only that I may decide if he is what he seems."

"Well, the place is Calcutta."

So spoke Benjamin, but he was sorry as soon as it was said. It had been his plan to give absolutely no clue, but he had broken over the rule under the seductive questioning of the detective.

"You deal in goods from that section, do you not?" asked Starr.

"Yes, but that don't matter," hastily replied Benjamin. "Now, can you get to work soon?"

"Yes."

"Do so, please."

"It shall be done."

The detective rose and passed out of the office.

Stevadore Steve was a man who rarely became excited, or allowed his thoughts to be pictured in his face when he was in public. He had gained some interesting food for thought during his interview with the importer, but nothing of this told in his manner as he wended his way to the part of the city where Asher Windham lived.

The detective's own office was on the line of travel, and he stopped in when he reached it.

From his desk he took a newspaper clipping and proceeded to read it closely. It was the same he had found some days before, and was in these words:

"News has been received of the loss of the Polly Ann. Being disabled in a storm she went down in mid-ocean, sinking with her cargo, though all of the crew were saved. The Polly Ann was a bark of long service, though deemed perfectly seaworthy. She was owned by Tereston Brothers & Brockway, of New York, and by them used in the East Indian trade. She left Calcutta on the fatal voyage with a cargo of opium, indigo and spices, and was commanded by Captain Hawk."

Steve compared the business card he had taken from the importer's office with the business name in the clipping.

"Tereston Brothers & Brockway," he murmured. "The same firm, surely. This is an odd coincidence. Certain events

connect, beyond doubt. Captain Hawk was at the hotel, and was visited by a young lady who wanted to know what had become of her father. He was supposed to have sailed on the Polly Ann with Hawk, and Hawk's ship was the one owned by Tereston Brothers & Brockway. Now, I am engaged by Benjamin Tereston to look to a man. What does all this mean?"

The known and unknown interlocking of events proved as fascinating as they were mysterious, and the detective found it ample food for thought to try and unravel the skein. To get full light was more than he could do, and what little he did find, if anything, he did not tell even to the walls.

An observer would have found it impossible to say whether he had satisfied himself in the least, but it was clear that much was lacking.

Not long did he delay in his own room, but, leaving, he pursued his course to the address given by Asher Windham.

The adventurer was in a hotel of doubtful reputation, and Steve invaded the common room with a feeling that he was treading in the tracks of a man of equally doubtful reputation.

He saw a bar with a crowd before it, and his gaze was at once drawn to a figure there. It was the central figure, for its owner was telling a racy story, and he had the crowd with him. Steve looked and recognized him at once.

It was the man who had been at the race-track with Lady Blanche.

"Ah! I have found one desired man, if not another," he thought. "I wonder if I can learn who he is?"

All were hanging on the words of the story-teller, and it would not do to hurry matters. Steve let the story go on to an end, and then, while the applause was being duly given by nearly all, he spoke to a man close to himself.

"Friend, do you know him?"

"The feller who told the story? His name is Asher Windham."

CHAPTER XVI.

A SURPRISING MEETING.

STEVEDORE STEVE received the news with composure, though it was a startling link in the chain. In trying to solve the various mysteries before him he had been led to notice the similarity in the business associations of Mrs. Blanche Armstrong and Mr. Tereston. He knew the man before him was an associate of the woman's, and now he knew this same man had been to Tereston and worried that gentleman.

What did it mean?

"Asher Windham," he repeated, after his informant. "Who is he?"

"Boards here."

"What is he?"

"A traveler. He come to New York only a short time ago, and has put up here since."

"Is he in business?"

"Ha! ha! He ain't that kind. He has some money, and he just spends it; that's all."

"Man of leisure, eh?"

"Yes, and a high roller, I reckon. Tells a mighty good story, don't he?"

Steve admitted that he did, but he had no more to say to the informant. The latter had exhausted his supply, and was no longer useful.

The detective stood watching Asher and wondering what the man was trying to do, but he had sight of him but little longer. Asher went to his own room, and the trail ended for the time.

"If there was no more to it than is seen on the surface," thought Steve, "I should say there was merely a matter of business rivalry in this, and that Mrs. Armstrong, consignee of the cargo of the Red Rover, aspired to down Tereston Brothers, who are in the same line, using Asher Windham as her agent to accomplish the end. But there is more in it, and it is that which puzzles me."

Going out of the hotel, the detective walked down the street in deep meditation.

"I need to learn more of this mysterious Blanche," he decided, "and it must be done. But how?"

His mind turned to Mullen, the discharged

janitor of the flats where the woman posed as Mrs. Armstrong.

"I understood him to say he was on good terms with all but her in the building. I may be able to make something of that. I will see."

Straight to Mullen's address he went, and that person was found at home. He answered all questions promptly.

"Yes, all in the place but her are my friends."

"Would they help you?"

"Sure."

"I may want to engage a flat there, and I would like to see them on the quiet before applying to the present janitor, and see if they are to my liking."

"Come with me!" exclaimed Mullen.

"To the building?"

"Yes."

"Will you be allowed inside?"

"I reckon I can visit my friends there."

"I had thought of getting a note of introduction from you, but, if your plan will work, it is even more satisfactory. We will go."

The journey was made, and, as the new janitor was not visible, they had no trouble in entering. Once in the flat of a family who liked Mullen well, they asked some questions.

"The madam is at home now," said their hostess, tartly, "and no good she is."

"Any vacant flat?"

"The one next to her was vacated this morning, and the new man has just finished putting it to rights."

"Next to her," repeated Steve. "Would that give me any chance to see into her quarters, if I took it?"

"You bet it would!" declared Mullen. "The flats are arranged oddly, being what the owner calls 'double' flats, and if you had that one, you could not only see into hers, but hear all that was said there."

"If the door is not locked, show me that flat."

Investigation showed that the door was still free of access, and they entered. The place was bare, but they moved cautiously, and Mullen led the way to a connecting point.

"See that door?" he asked, in a whisper. "It's fastened, but could be unlocked if desired, and the two made into one. Then look up there!"

"What a transom?" asked Steve.

"Yes. If you want a look, just keep mum, and I'll open it, but you will have to be very sly when it's open."

"So I will, but open it, anyhow."

Mullen brought forward a bench and placed under the transom. Despite his assertion, he was afraid it might be fastened on the other side in some way, but such proved not to be the case. It opened readily, and then he took a look beyond. This done, he motioned to Steve and then stepped down.

The detective succeeded him on the bench, and himself gazed beyond. What he saw was very gratifying.

Blanche was there.

She sat in an easy-chair, poring over a book, and oblivious to all around her. Steve arranged the transom just to suit him, and then looked to his fill.

There might have been carousals in the rooms, as Mullen said, but all was in order now, and the place had a quiet, respectable look. No bottles, gaudy ornaments, or other libels on good taste were to be seen.

The detective's curiosity was not easily satisfied. He liked to gaze on this woman and speculate as to what she was. In his life as a detector of crime he had met all kinds of women, and it did not affect him that this one was of rare beauty.

Yet, as a man, he could not help admiring her dashing style, even while he was the inexorable officer.

"Woman, what is your secret?" he wondered. "Somehow, I place you as the corner-stone of all the crookedness that I have scent of, and you are a mystery of more than passing interest."

He gazed until Mullen grew impatient, but was about to step down when a knock sounded at Mrs. Armstrong's door. Languidly she called:

"Come!"

The door opened; a man entered.

Steve gave a start of surprise.

The new-comer was Benjamin Tereston!

Full as the case was of surprises Steve was not prepared for this sight, and when he saw the two persons, Tereston and Blanche, greet each other in the matter-of-fact manner of acquaintances he was utterly at loss to account for the situation.

"Am I a dupe?" he thought, in bewilderment.

"I am glad to find you in," remarked Tereston, with a sigh.

"I am always in," answered Blanche, smiling amusedly.

"Except when you are out, which is usually the case. However, that does not concern me, since you are in now."

Benjamin had taken a seat without an invitation, his manner being that of one who feels sure of his position. Stevedore Steve studied both attentively. There was no sign of more in their conduct toward each other than is to be seen in that of all acquaintances when good will exists.

"I trust you are well?" said Blanche, languidly.

"I am not; I am tired and worn out."

"Too much work?"

"Too much worry!"

"What worries you?"

"This infernal business we are engaged in!"

"Pshaw! is that still on your mind?"

"It is gnawing at my life like a canker. Would to heaven I had never gone into the scheme. My conscience is never at rest."

"Conscience?"

"Fears, then."

"My dear Mr. Tereston, you are worrying where there is no need to worry. Our tracks are all covered up, and all is going merry as you please."

"Do you believe that? I do not; I see discovery and disgrace ahead of us. If ever man repented I do, but I will be candid enough to say it is not all conscience."

"I should say not!" retorted Blanche. "When I came to you with this glorious plan—a plan you would never have thought of but for me—you demurred, and, for a long while, refused to agree to it. Why? Did you dwell upon conscience then? It was not mentioned; you spoke only of your fears."

"True!" sighed Benjamin.

"You are in a way to be richer at one bound than you could be by a long course of petty delving at your store business. Who studied up the scheme? Who saw the way to get rich? Who brought it to your notice? Who was the great planner of the game?"

"You."

"What are my thanks?"

"You dwell upon that feature; now let me present another. If we are detected it will be shame, dishonor, imprisonment and woe for all, and, perhaps, the gallows for some of us—"

"Do you expect to hang?"

"I fear it," answered Tereston, in a trembling voice, "for there is something new which alarms me. I think justice is on our track!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A QUEEN OF FIRE.

TERESTON had been moving uneasily while this conversation was going on, and Stevedore Steve, watching at the transom, thought that his manner was that of a man who hesitates to break an unpleasant topic.

At the last words Lady Blanche, for the first time, seemed to discover that there was more than weak repining in it all. She looked at the importer more critically.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I have had a visitor who bodes no good."

"Explain!"

"A man has come to me and made the suggestion that I take him into my confidence and use for our mutual benefit advantages which he claims to possess in Calcutta, so I can get my goods cheaper."

"I see nothing startling in that."

"I do."

"What?"

"He is not what he seems."

"What do you mean?"

"The man is not one to be interested in trade. He bears all the stamp of a free and easy man of the world; a careless rover who

has plenty of money and cares for nothing more, least of all, for trade and its profits."

"I cannot see that this proves anything."

"He is a fraud, and I know it!" persisted Tereston.

"Does that indicate knowledge of certain events?"

"He says he is lately from Calcutta."

"What of it?"

"Suppose he knows of what has occurred? Suppose he knew *him*, or, worse yet, suppose the police are on our track?"

Benjamin leaned forward, and his manner was that of one so nervous he could hardly sit still. Lady Blanche began to look troubled, but she had a puzzled air, and plainly did not see the need of such alarm.

"Tell me all about it," she requested.

Tereston told the story. Steve noticed that two things were omitted, the first by chance, doubtless; the last by design, assuredly. The two were, first, the name of the caller; the second, that he had summoned a detective to his aid.

"I am still unable to see how you are menaced by all this," commented Lady Blanche, "but, possibly, it might be well to investigate this man. You say you have his address. Did he give a name?"

"Yes. It was Asher Windham."

"What?"

The race-track queen had been lolling back in her chair, but she came to an upright position with surprising quickness. She sat there, bolt upright, too, and her face had undergone as much of a change as her position. That face had grown hard, and the eyes glittered with unpleasant fire. Tigress-like was her appearance.

Steve smiled grimly. They were getting to the meat of the case.

"I said his name was Asher Windham," replied Benjamin, surprise on his own face as he noted her emotion.

"Ah-h-h!" breathed the adventuress.

"Do you know him?" asked the importer, wonderingly.

Steve had opportunity to see how well she could govern herself then. Her tense face suddenly moved convulsively as she tried to be calm, and then settled down as few women could have composed it on short notice.

"Describe him!" she requested, serenely.

Tereston obeyed, and gave a really good description.

When he was done Blanche was fully herself.

"No," she observed, "I do not know him, though I do know one man named Lasker Winton—"

"But this one's name is Asher Windham," corrected Benjamin.

"Oh! is it? Ha! ha!" laughed the adventuress, "I was wholly on the wrong track, especially as my Mr. Winton is a tall, thin person. Wholly different. Well, well, this man may be all right."

"It was a praiseworthy effort to be unconcerned. It deceived Tereston; it did not deceive Steve Starr. He could see the gleam in her eyes, and he knew she was very angry because of Asher's call."

"I don't think he is all right," replied the importer.

"Pshaw! Just let this matter rest, and I will give you my word you will hear no more of that. Even if he meditated mischief, there is my good husband to deal with him. Ansel Armstrong would allow him no rope to do mischief, if it was his plan."

Benjamin sighed.

"I will not press this upon you," he said, slowly, "but I am in fear. He may be a police spy, and if our crimes come to light we die on the gallows."

"Enough of that! I have good nerves, but I don't want any such lugubrious talk. We schemed for big money, and we will have it or go down in the wreck as the good ship Polly did. But I don't mean to sink. Bless you, no; we will float gayly, like the Red Rover. Ha! ha! the way we handle our barks is a lesson to diplomats!"

"I wish both the Polly Ann and the Red Rover were at the bottom of the ocean!" exclaimed Tereston, bitterly.

"Nonsense!"

"Justice is on our track."

"Oh! come off!" cried Blanche, impatiently.

"Wait and see."

"Ben," spoke the adventuress, leaning forward in her chair, "if we find there is danger you will see how I'll deal with it. Strangle a whelp at birth and it will never bay at your heels. You once told me that if I was young in years I was old in crime. I am, and from experience in that line is born resolution and cunning. If any one dares to molest us, he dies. See?"

The importer shivered. Alty though she was he had fear of this red-cheeked adventuress, and her manner now chilled him.

"We will see," he replied.

"So we will—we will see victory."

Tereston had but little to say about his ominous visitor except that he had vague apprehension of him, and though he dwelt upon the subject for some time he had to give it up ultimately and take his departure. This left Blanche alone in the room, and, as she supposed, free from observation, and she rose and began to pace back and forth excitedly.

"Scoundrel!" she hissed, as she worked her hands together nervously, "does he want to die? I could kill a traitor as I would a kitten, and he will learn it if he does not—Ha!"

It was another knock at the door, and she raised her head quickly. Marked was the change which came into her face, and Steve Starr arrived at a conclusion.

"She knows who it is!" he thought.

Lady Blanche calmed herself.

"Come!" she directed.

The door opened and Asher Windham entered. He came with easy confidence and an air of enthusiasm combined, and he held out both hands in warm greeting.

"Sweet empress of my life!" he cried, "I have come to you again on the wings of love, my soul thrilled with the melody of your voice and my heart warmed by the light of your glorious eyes—"

"Stop!"

Asher did stop.

He was an old hand, but the hot anger which manifested itself in her voice and blazed in her eyes was so deep that his nimble tongue was deprived of the power of motion.

She stood in silence, absolutely glaring at him until he stupidly muttered:

"Eh?"

"Do you want me to use this on you?"

Lady Blanche whipped out a revolver and turned the muzzle toward the adventurer. It looked as if but a little was needed to make her execute the implied threat, but the very imminence of the peril caused Asher to rise superior to common fear. He folded his arms.

"I know not what my crime is," he remarked, steadily, "but if you want to kill me I have nothing to say. Proceed!"

"You know your deserts!"

"I know that I see a rash woman in anger; I know no more. What passion moves you I know not."

"Would you have me lower this weapon?"

"Do as you wish."

"I will not lower it."

"Do as you wish."

"You carry bravado well."

"Wrong! I carry innocence."

"Did you carry innocence when you sought Ben Tereston with the hope of getting into his house so you could woo his fair niece?" sharply demanded the race-track queen.

Asher's face fell. He had an iron nerve, but the shot was too direct for even his stony composure. She had not only made known that he was detected, but she had named the exact object with which he had sought the importer.

"Aha! you quail!" she cried.

"Who would not with a revolver confronting him?"

"So you fear the weapon—"

"I do not!"

"Prove it! I am about to shoot!"

She drew back the hammer of the revolver.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MYSTERIOUS BLANCHE.

ASHER WINDHAM did not waver in the least.

"If you would lose your truest friend, shoot!" he repeated.

"Traitor!" Lady Blanche exclaimed.

"I am not a traitor."

"Dare you deny that you went to Tereston with just the object I have ascribed to you?"

"I admit it!"

"And yet you say you are my friend."

"You are right, and yet you err. When with you I saw Miss Tereston. That she is fair to look upon is correct, unless my eyes err—"

"She is a very commonplace thing!" asserted Blanche, scornfully.

"As to that I do not care. You heard me speak to her on board the Rose Addison. I thought her family name very familiar, and I think so now. I have a way of seeking to solve mysteries which interest me. In this case she rebuffed me sharply, but I wanted to know why the name was so familiar. I took just the way you have indicated to learn. I went to her uncle, to make his acquaintance, thinking I could learn of him—if not, I could see more of her. That was all. Love her! Bah! she is a callow school-girl!"

"Well said," admitted the adventuress, "but not to be believed. Go further and confess that you love her."

"Never!"

"Yet, I know it. Asher Windham, when you asked to be my friend I told you that the only possible way was for you to keep out of sight of Ansel Armstrong. Carefully have I worked things so you could see me, and yet not see him, or, rather, not be seen by him; for he is of a jealous nature, and trouble would surely follow discovery. Now, you reward me by falling in love with her!"

"I swear I have not!" asserted Asher.

"Would you do all you have just to learn why her name was familiar?"

"I would."

"Bah!"

"You don't believe me?"

"I do not."

"Then adieu!"

He turned toward the door.

"Stop!" she exclaimed.

"Well?"

"You need not go in anger."

"You have sent me away."

"I have not."

"Anyhow, you accuse me of treachery."

"It may not be true."

"Well, you despise me. I will go."

"Stop!"

She cast down the revolver, moved quickly to his side and rested her hand on his shoulder.

"We are all liable to err," she murmured.

"Perhaps I have been too hasty. Let us still be friends."

He regarded her gloomily.

"What can come of an acquaintance which is founded on contempt—your contempt?"

Lady Blanche surprised herself by breaking into tears.

"You will kill me!" she cried.

"Kill you?" cried Archer. "Kill the woman I love? Rather would I die myself!"

"Then do not wrong me. For my cruel words to you I beg your pardon, and I ask that you will forgive me for once."

"Gladly, gladly!"

He bent over the hands of the weeping woman and imprinted a kiss on one of the white members. As he did so a covert smile crossed his lips. He had played good cards against hers and won, and it gratified him to find that his wit was superior to her own.

Peace restored, they sat down and began to talk more amiably.

"How did you know I had been to Tereston?" asked Archer.

"I chanced to be passing and saw you go in," glibly lied Blanche.

"Ah!"

"I wish," added the adventuress, "that you would keep away from them. I know something of them, and I do not like the crew. Keep away if you would please me."

"I will, my angel!" declared Archer.

"You are very good."

"You and Tereston must be business rivals," pursued the visitor. "He is an importer from Calcutta, and so are you."

"No, I am not."

"No? I thought you were interested in the bark Red Rover, or her cargo, at least."

"I am not. My name is used as that of the consignee, but I have no more to do with it. I know nothing about genuine business, and do not know a bark from a cat-boat."

"Who is the real consignee?"

"I am. As to whom I represent, in acting in that capacity, you will please excuse me if I do not state."

Asher did not seem to care about the matter, and he let it drop. The rest of the conversation was not important, but Stevedore Steve kept his place and listened until Archer had finished his visit and gone. Then the detective stepped down from the bench.

"Are you any the wiser?" asked Mullen.

"I am so full of fresh information that I am literally crammed to the neck," replied Steve.

"I hope you will make that woman sweat."

"She is likely to do it."

"I believe she is a hard case."

"So do I."

Mr. Mullen evinced a desire to learn all he could about the affair, but the detective managed to keep him fairly well satisfied without betraying anything. They left the building and separated outside the door. Steve walked on alone, his head bent thoughtfully.

Truly, he had made discoveries rapidly, and there was food for thought. He revolved the latest acquisitions in his mind with good results, but was still thinking when he almost ran into another man.

"Look out, there!" was the order.

Steve glanced up and saw a familiar face and form. It was Pardon Gallup, with his "sandwich" boards on his back, though he now carried a new sign, and one which extolled the wares of some dealer in soap.

"Hallo, my friend! How are you?"

"Oh! is it you, boss?" replied Pardon. "Didn't know ye at first. Want a sample o' soap?"

"Not any, thank you. See here, Gallup, you know you told me about the man and the woman who came to the bark Red Rover, the night you say somebody was killed there?"

"Sure, Mike!"

"You said you gained only a partial view of that woman."

"I may hev been wrong."

"Would you know her again?"

"Would et pay me?"

"Yes."

"Then I reckon my peepers would be keen enough fer the job. Know her? Sure, Mike!"

"You won't identify the wrong person?"

"Not I!"

"Then why this sudden rush of recollection?"

"The explanation is *b-e-e-r*, beer!"

"Thirsty, are you. Well, you shall drink. Mind you, you drink, anyhow, whether you recognize her or not. Your taste of the liquid that is man's curse does not depend on recognition. You get it anyhow, and I want the truth from you."

"You shall hev the prime, solid facks. Sure, Mike!"

"Then come with me. I am not sure we can get the view, as we shall have to depend on the party coming to the window, but it may happen in our favor—"

"Gosh ter mighty!" cried Pardon.

"What?"

"There she is now!"

"Who?"

But Steve had turned, as he saw Lady Blanche riding past in a carriage he had the explanation in part.

"Drown'd me fer a lousy wharf-rat ef that ain't the very female who was on the Red Rover!" persisted Pardon.

"The night of the supposed murder?"

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"I kin swear to it."

The sandwich man spoke with great confidence, and his signs waggled with emotion as he looked. His vagabond face bore the stamp of sincerity, and Steve felt that he was to be trusted.

The carriage rolled away, leaving the two men alone.

"One thing more, Mr. Gallup. Is there more you have not told me?"

"No more."

"This is not a fiction?"

"Oh! no; it's true. Sure, Mike!"

The sandwich man had spoken, and Steve made his dirty face beam by giving him a dollar. Then they separated, and Steve went on alone.

"The case takes shape," he murmured, "but it's a big mystery still."

CHAPTER XIX.

STEVE IS SUSPICIOUS.

ONCE more in one of his several rooms Stevedore Steve sat down to meditate on some of the puzzling circumstances which had come before him of late.

"We have two vessels, both barks, the one being the Polly Ann and the other the Red Rover. Both sailed from Calcutta with cargoes of indigo, spices and opium."

"The Polly Ann was lost at sea. She belonged to and was laden with merchandise for Tereston Brothers & Brockway, merchants and importers. The Red Rover reached New York all right. The reputed consignee of her cargo was Mrs. Blanche Armstrong, but she has in my hearing declared that she is a mere figure-head, and has no real interest in the matter."

"Blanche is well acquainted with Benjamin Tereston. Here is more that is odd and perplexing. Two barks, two like cargoes, and so on."

"When the Red Rover lay in her dock there were strange occurrences on board. One night most of the crew were given shore leave, and of those who remained all are said to have been under the influence of liquor."

"A cab drives up and a man and a woman alight and go on board. The woman was Blanche. A fight follows in the cabin of the bark, and there was a cry of murder. After that Ben Bipps is seen no more, but there is sign of bigger game. Benjamin Tereston and Blanche talk of having large interests at stake."

"Blanche and Captain Thomes of the Red Rover search the cabin for a diamond said to be lost, and they speak of a tragedy and a dead man who may rise from the water. A diamond, yet Ben Bipps was a spendthrift who could not have owned such a gem."

"Blanche talks to Benjamin Tereston of a big scheme they have worked—one planned by her, but engineered by both. What was it? Blanche seems to be the central figure in an event as important as it is vague. What has been done? The law is feared by Tereston. Why?"

"Here is a mystery which defies me thus far. Suspicious and theories come to me, but why dwell upon them? Proof is lacking, and it is folly to theorize until I can get closer to the secret."

"I must solve the mystery. But how?"

Steve leaned his head upon his head and thought deeply. He felt that a great crime had been committed, and that back of it lay a plot such as was rarely seen.

The case was fascinating.

All his professional zeal was enlisted in the attempt to clear the veil of mystery away.

There was a knock at the door, and when he had answered it he saw a messenger boy.

"Stephen Starr?" inquired the youth.

"Yes."

"Letter for you."

The letter was handed over, and the detective signed for it. He then opened the envelope and read as follows:

"FRIEND STEPHEN:—Mebbe I can't ketch you with this, but these presents is for to inform you that that man Mike, the stevedore, is active as the devil in a gale at sea. His two cronies who fell from the balcony is layin' in the hospital in centsible, so they can't talk, but Mike is worryin' about them fer fear they will."

"He don't say nothin', Mike don't: but he looks mighty rusty. Say, messmate, you want ter keep a weather eye open fer him, or he will do ye damage. I go with my revolver half-cocked, an' my brains fully so."

"Look out for Mike!"

"He was ter kill us that night the balcony broke, an' don't you git the notion he has give up. Watch out fer Mike!"

"Yours respectibel,

"HICKMAN PETERS."

Steve looked at the waiting messenger.

"Was there to be an answer?"

"The sailor didn't say."

"Where did you get this?"

"He came to the office."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No."

"You can go."

The boy went, and Steve read the warning again. It did not surprise him. After he and Hick studied out that it was Mike who had been the confederate of the men who fell from the balcony, he had all along felt that he was likely to hear from the surly stevedore again. Hick appeared to have no specific information, but Steve felt that he would like to see him.

Thinking that Hick might be at the stevedores' boarding-house, the detective went in that direction. He was near the door when he was accosted by a man whom he quickly recognized as Trezzo Petresso, the keeper of the fruit-stand to which his attention had before been called.

"Can I speaka with you?" asked the Italian.

"Of course."

"Will you comea to my house?"

"To your house? Why should I?"

"There is a man there who wants to see you."

"Who is he?"

"I know not."

"Why does he want to see me?"

"That he did not tella, but he calls for you often when he is wrong in his mind, and when he getta sober he send me to you."

"Sober? Has he been drunk?"

"No; he is hurted. Some men fall on him and beat him, and he is a sicka man."

"Tell me all about it, Trezzo."

"I found him outside my house last night, all beat and unconscious, and I takea him in out of pity. He has beena out of his head most of the time, and he calla for Stevedore Steve. Then he gets sober, and he sends me to finda you."

"Is he a sailor?"

"No. At least, he is not dressed likea one."

Steve did not understand the situation. His first thought had been that the unknown man might be some associate of Hick Peters, though this notion would hardly stand investigation, it seemed; and now it was a case without light.

"Wait one moment and I will go with you."

The detective entered the boarding-house and looked for Hick, but the sailor was not there. Steve also gave a glance to see if there was any sign of Mike, but the stevedore was invisible. Returning to Trezzo the detective asked:

"Do you live up the Five Points way?"

"Oh! no; right near here. It is buta a short walk."

"Go on, then."

The Italian led the way, and the house was soon reached. Steve had expected a humble dwelling, and he was not disappointed. More than that, however, the place had a look which he did not like. With the shades of night around, as they then were, and the ugly, sinister air of the big, rambling house there was something that made Steve reluctant to enter.

He looked more closely to his guide.

Trezzo Petresso had not been gifted by nature with a good face. He had the swarthy complexion and black hair which was to be expected of one of his nationality, but there was no special need, it seemed, of the furtive little eyes, low brow and evasive glance which were his. Nature ought not to have given him these unless she intended to mark him as an object of suspicion.

Steve let this occupy his attention but briefly.

"Go on!" he directed.

They entered.

Trezzo led the way to the third floor and entered a room which was conspicuous because of its poor and meager furnishing, and because of the dirt which abounded everywhere.

"The sicka man is in the next room," explained Trezzo, softly.

They passed through a doorway.

In the room they now entered a light was burning dimly. It revealed a place even more repulsive than that they had just left, and the total absence of windows explained the unwholesome air which abounded.

At one side was a bed, and on this was a man.

Near at hand sat a woman of middle age, and Steve quickly decided that she was Trezzo's wife. She was not more inviting than the fruit-dealer, and after one glance, she gazed persistently at the floor.

"How is the sicka man?" asked Trezzo.

"He knowa nothing," was the reply.

"Is he not sober any more?"

"He sleepa now like a log and will not awaken."

Steve had moved to the bedside. He saw at once that the occupant of the bed was not any one known to him. He was a man of large size, and very muscular, if that muscle had not deserted him; but his face was now very pale.

Over his head, in part, was a bandage of dirty white.

"Can you rouse him?" asked the detective.

"He knowa nothing," the Italian woman replied, stoically.

The detective shook the unknown, but failed to make him stir.

"He is not now sober," repeated Trezzo, "but he will comea around. Have patience and wait."

Steve studied Trezzo's face, and the vague feeling of uneasiness grew upon him. Trezzo looked positively sinister.

CHAPTER XX.

STEVE FIGHTS HIS WAY.

THERE was silence for several minutes, and then Trezzo broke it with his favorite expression:

"He will be sober soon."

Stevedore Steve started. The Italian's voice had fallen unpleasantly on his ears, and the breaking of the lull served to bring all of Steve's doubts to the surface. Trezzo and his wife grew more ominous of aspect, and the dimly-lighted room took on the same air. The detective struggled in vain to throw off his fears—fears that were so unusual to him—but he did not reply.

His gaze wandered again to the man on the bed.

The ghastly pallor of that set face had seemed at the start to indicate a desperate condition, but Steve was growing more observing, as well as suspicious, and he began to doubt the pallor.

Was it imagination, or was the pallor unnatural?

To him it looked out of the course of nature, and as he gazed a new idea came to him. The color was fictitious. Such was his suspicion, and it suggested a good deal.

For the moment the regards of the Italian and his wife were turned away, and Steve obeyed a sudden idea and wet his finger. He applied it to the pale cheek, and took it away with a smear of white upon it.

The pallor was bogus.

"I am in a trap," thought the detective.

"Why?"

Trezzo and his wife had looked back.

"Suppose this man should die without regaining his senses?" Steve inquired, quietly.

"He will soon be sober," persisted Trezzo.

"But he seems very sick. How is his pulse?"

The detective placed his finger on the unknown's wrist.

"Slow and uncertain," he murmured, for effect. "It is the pulse of one liable to drop away at any time."

"He will get sober," droned Trezzo.

Steve looked at the fruit-vender, and then his gaze wandered further. He had seen some one at the connecting door. A girl stood there, leaning forward in an eager way.

It was Carmo, the Italian's daughter.

She held Steve's attention—held it by a series of quick, suggestive motions. Rapidly her fingers moved. She drew them across her throat, and then pointed to the visitor: she pointed to the alleged sick man and

shook her head; she looked at the hall door and made several sweeping gestures as if to bid the detective hasten away.

Then she disappeared.

"I am warned fully!" thought Steve. "Danger lurks here—why and how I know not, but it is so. I have been lured here by foes. What is the plot?"

He was warned, but he did not go. He had a revolver in his pocket and felt able to care for himself in any ordinary emergency. It might be criminal rashness, but he did not feel inclined to go.

He wished to learn what the plot was.

Footsteps sounded in the hall and another man entered without the preliminary of a knock. He was a big fellow who looked quite as ugly as any one then there, and Steve hailed his coming as an omen of the danger at hand. He swept a quick glance around, and then asked:

"How is he?"

"Bad!" replied Trezzo. "Sit down, neighbor."

And the visitor obeyed.

"They are getting in the whole colony," thought Steve. "How many do they need to spring the trap?"

Trezzo's wife rose. Listlessly she moved across the room. Her course was away from the detective, and he did not suspect for the moment that he had any unusual interest in her movements, but that there was a definite object was soon proven.

Suddenly the room was plunged into darkness.

She had extinguished the lamp.

Steve caught at the situation immediately, and none too soon. The man who had last entered the room made a leap toward the detective, and his outstretched hands were dimly visible.

They encountered nothing. With a quick motion Steve had vacated his chair, and the man was foiled.

"Quick!" that person called. "Don't let him escape!"

A jar followed. Steve had neatly knocked him down.

Then came another voice.

"Let me at him!"

From the door rushed a man not before visible, and Steve was so taken at a disadvantage that two muscular arms were closed around him before he could evade the hold.

"I have him!" was the exultant exclamation.

The detective recognized the voice—it was that of Mike, the stevedore.

Now the plot was very plain, and Steve did not need to speculate further. All he needed to do was to defend himself—all, but it was much with so many to deal with.

He realized that he must meet four men, and he did not let any time go to waste. Mike's strong arms were around him, but he immediately set upon the fellow with resistless fury. If it was a fight he wanted he should have his fill, and the officer united unusual strength with marked skill.

Grappling fiercely with his foe he whirled him about with a rush which evidently disturbed even Mike's confidence.

"Close in!" cried the stevedore. "Give me your help!"

There were heavy steps and hurried movements all around, but the imperiled man's attention was all given to Mike. With a great effort he broke the assailant's hold, and then hurled the fellow from him like a missile. And the missile struck Trezzo Petresso full in the stomach, and the fruit-vender was knocked over like a ten-pin.

He emitted a howl, and rose only to flee from the house.

Another blow from Steve and another of his foes was felled. It left the way of retreat open, but he was not ready to go alone. As Mike came up Steve hit him with his clubbed revolver, and then began the task of trying to drag him from the room.

It was no new work for the officer, but he found it was a large job. Mike fought like a demon, and the other two men came to his aid and kept the fight warm.

Beset though he was Steve held fast, and Mike was dragged into the hall. This might prove to be only the beginning, for in a place like that he had to expect all to be against him, and he looked with some apprehension lest the noise had called in recruits to the hostile standard.

Yet, he reached the head of the stairs all right.

Then the mishap occurred.

As one man the whole gang was upon him, and he tripped over something and fell. Down the stairs he shot, but he held to Mike with resolution. He would not give up his prisoner if he could help it.

Bump!

Bump!

Down he went, and so eccentrically that the precious hold was broken. His hand had nothing in it, now, and he went rattling to the foot of the stairs. Quickly he sprung up.

He stood alone.

No foe was following him."

For a moment he was inclined to rush back and fight them all, but the madness of the step finally occurred to him so strongly that he gave it up. He needed an ally, and he opened the door to the street. As luck would have it a patrolman was just passing—a man whom he knew well.

"What the dickens is up?" demanded that person.

"Come with me!" requested Steve.

"Into that crib?"

"Yes."

"We want more men."

"Are you afraid?"

"Come, Steve, that is rough. You know I ain't, but I know what kind they have in there. Maybe you do, too, for your feathers look a bit ruffled."

"I have had a scrap, but I do not fear to tackle them again. If you are willing, in we go."

"Done!"

They entered and Steve led the way to Trezzo's rooms, but when they arrived everybody was gone, including the man who had been so pallid of face.

A search was begun, but in the midst of it they encountered Carma.

"No use," she observed, quietly.

"Why not?"

"They have all skipped by the rear."

"To go where?" asked Steve.

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"Where do frightened rats go?" was her answer.

"Well," said the detective after a pause, "I do not care so very much. Let them go. Girl, what do you know about this affair?"

"A man they call Mike did it all. He bought up my father. See?"

"Your father will get his precious head into a noose."

"Don't you touch him. Didn't I warn you?"

"You did, and I am not inclined to trouble your kin, if Trezzo did act a dirty part. What grudge has Mike against me?"

"I ain't got no idea," replied Carma, "but this much I do know: he is bound to kill you if he can. He is hunting your life, and you don't want ever to sleep. Beware of Mike!"

CHAPTER XXI.

ABOUT THE MISSING MAN.

CARMA spoke very earnestly, and Steve perceived that she was of stuff decidedly different from the rest of the Petresso family. She had proved it by warning him when he was in danger, and that counted as positive evidence.

The detective looked at her more keenly than he had done before. Pretty she was not, but she had a bright face which made amends for any lack in other directions. Had she not been reared in such a sphere of life she would have been one fit for admiration in the full sense, and after her service, Steve gave her admiration enough to be determined to help her in return, when he could attend to it.

"My girl," he replied, "here is five dollars. Take it for your square dealing with me, and remember this. If you can learn more of this case, and notify me, you shall have more money."

"Mon' is good," answered Carma, "an I will keep an eye open."

Not wishing to advertise her as his ally the detective now took his leave. It was possible that due search would have revealed Mike, but if the stevedore was left to

himself he was pretty sure to show his hand more effectually than if captured.

Steve was willing to let him go.

"You were lucky to get out of there alive," remarked the patrolman, when they were on the street. "It's a hard old place, and it's a wonder all the tenants didn't jump on you. They don't love officers."

"I judge not," drily admitted Steve.

"If there is a grudge, watch them, too."

Steve went home with this additional warning ringing in his ears. He did not care for more of adventure that night, so did not go to the stevedores' resort, but to his own premises.

The early hours of the following morning he devoted to meditation on his case, and then set off to see if there was anything new to be learned. He was walking thus when he chanced to take notice of a carriage which was proceeding through the street.

Discoveries followed. Besides the driver he saw two persons, and both of them were familiar to him. One, a man, was Benjamin Tereston. The other, a lady—he stopped short in his surprise.

It was the young woman he had seen at the hotel when Captain Hawk found his stay made unpleasant by her call.

"The dickens!" the detective murmured.

He watched for awhile, and then followed briskly after the carriage. He had been under the impression that he would not have far to go, and this belief was proved correct.

Tereston's office was soon reached, and there he alighted and entered. The girl remained in the vehicle and was driven away toward the north. Quickly Steve called a cab and followed her.

The pursuit took him to the residential part of the city, and to a fine house which she entered. Steve went boldly to the door and read the name on the plate.

"Tereston!" he murmured. "This grows of interest. I may block my own game, but I am disposed to enter, if I can, and see her."

He rung the bell. He did not then have on the clothes of a stevedore, and as he was well-dressed he did not expect much trouble. Happening to have in his pocket a card which bore the name, Albert Moss, he made it ready for use, and when a servant girl appeared he bowed his best bow and spoke:

"Pardon me, but will you take this card to Miss—to Miss—Bah! how forgetful I am! I mean, the young lady who has just entered?"

The servant thought that the smile had been captivating, and she helped him out.

"Miss Tereston," she suggested.

"Yes, certainly."

"Please come into the parlor, sir."

"Thanks, I will. Kindly say to her that I am here on a matter of importance."

"I will, sir."

Left alone in the parlor Steve congratulated himself on his success, thus far. He had learned the name of the young lady, and it was a good deal gained.

He now hoped to clear up the mystery of her singular talk with Captain Hawk at the hotel, and he was doubly anxious to do so since he had learned the strange fact that she bore the same surname as Benjamin Tereston.

She soon appeared, and he rose politely.

"Pardon me for intruding, Miss Tereston," he said, "but I have not come through any frivolous motive. I believe you are related to Mr. Benjamin Tereston."

"He is my uncle, sir."

"So you are the daughter of a brother of his?"

"Yes, sir."

"May I ask if your father resides here, also?"

"He does not."

A marked shadow had crossed her face, and Steve detected sadness and worry there.

"My father went abroad several months ago," she added, after a pause, "and I have since lived with my uncle."

"Is your father still abroad?"

"Ye-es, sir," was the hesitating answer.

"May I ask where?"

"I don't know."

"Indeed!"

"I last heard from him in Calcutta."

Stevedore Steve had not forgotten anything that had been said between her and

Captain Hawk, and he suspected that he knew the story nearly as well as she did, but he had to go about it in the right way.

"Then he is still there?" he inquired, quietly.

"Since you are a friend of father's," returned Ionice, getting a little mixed on what had been said, in her returning anxiety for her parent, "I will say that I have not heard from him for a long while. He wrote me from Calcutta, and then no further word came."

"Where was he going from there?"

"Home!"

"Here?"

"Yes."

"But has not arrived?"

"No."

"How do you account for that?"

"May I ask if you make these inquiries with a friendly motive, sir?"

"Most surely I do, Miss Tereston. I should be glad to see your father, and wish to get clue to the facts."

"Then you shall know all I can tell. When my father last wrote he was in Calcutta, and there, too, was the bark Polly Ann, a vessel belonging to the firm of Tereston Brothers & Brockway. She was about to sail for New York, and my father wrote that he would sail on her."

"The vessel started on her journey, but was wrecked in mid-ocean, and sunk with all her cargo. According to her captain, whose name is Hawk, no lives were lost."

"But, sir, from that time no word has ever come from my father, and his absence has become so prolonged that I am in terrible fear."

"This is the situation now. I have seen Captain Hawk, suspecting that harm might have come to my father, and desiring to know the worst, but he declares he did not see father in Calcutta, at all. When I tell you that father wrote that he was already on board the Polly Ann you will know how much cause I have to worry."

Stevodore Steve thought he did know.

"How do you account for it?" he asked.

"I can't rid myself of the notion that my father's life has been lost, and that Uncle Benjamin is keeping the truth from me out of a mistaken impression that it is kinder to do so."

"Has your uncle investigated?"

"He affects to laugh at my fears."

"Perhaps," suggested the detective, insinuatingly, "he is not as much attached to your father as you are."

"I never knew two brothers who were so good friends as they were. Their affection was never demonstrative, but it was deep and earnest."

Steve was puzzled anew. Under the light of her revelations he believed he could see the plot, and that Benjamin had done violence to his brother Edmund, but the last assertion staggered him.

Still, he hung to his theory.

"They are partners, I believe?"

"They are supposed to be, and, really, were for many years, but, before father went abroad, he sold out all interest in the firm of Tereston Brothers & Brockway. The old name will remain, forever."

"I suppose your father accumulated so much money it would take all his time to see to it?"

"He was rich, but your supposition is not correct. When he retired from business he practically disposed of all he had. He gave to charitable institutions, to Uncle Benjamin, to distant relatives, and on me bestowed the rest. All he left to himself was the house we own, and I was to pay the bills, there, from my own ample income."

Another theory faded.

If Benjamin had done violence to Edmund it could not have been to get his money.

"The Terestons are all liberal," added Ionice. "Uncle Benjamin gives much to the poor, and is very rich, in spite of it."

The nail was clinched, and Steve asked himself, What object could there have been to injure Edmund Tereston?

CHAPTER XXII.

DARK SUSPICIONS.

THE detective sat in silence, meditating on the case, but, presently, Ionice resumed:

"It is peculiar that an old family friend of ours, a Mr. Benson, claims that he saw

father in a cab only a short time ago, right here in New York. He knows him as well as we do, ourselves, and ought not to be mistaken. He asserts that he was not mistaken, and that he did see him as stated."

"When did he see him?"

"To be exact, it was the 12th day of the month."

Steve Starr could not repress a start. It was on the 12th of the month that the tragedy occurred on board the Red Rover—the night that Pardon Gallup declared murder had been done there—an assertion backed up by the words of Benjamin Tereston and Lady Blanche.

Was it Edmund Tereston's "ghost" that Captain Thomes expected to see rise from the water?

"Where are the men who were on the Polly Ann when she foundered?" asked the detective.

"I only know of Captain Hawk. I tried to locate others, but I could not, and the captain said they had all gone. Most of them sailed to Liverpool, without touching at New York, and the few who came here soon drifted away. So Hawk says."

"Do Tereston Brothers & Brockway own, or manage, any vessel but the Polly Ann?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, positive."

Steve Starr was perplexed. He felt that he was still without the motive for the occurrences which had brought about so much trouble. Benjamin Tereston had spoken to Lady Blanche about a "crime" they had committed which would send them to the "gallows" if it were found out. This surely looked as if Edmund was dead, but what was the motive for the deed?

He was prepared to believe that Edmund had reached New York, but how had the fact been kept so secret? No newspaper, it seemed, had chronicled the fact that one of the owners of the Polly Ann was on board when she foundered, and it seemed such could not have been the case.

Steve's deeply thoughtful face arrested Ionice's attention and turned his own thoughts from her troubles for a time.

"You are a total stranger to me, sir," she remarked. "May I ask what you knew of my father, and why you happen to call?"

"Miss Tereston, I called to help you," was the frank reply.

"Indeed?"

"Exactly."

"Will you please explain?"

"Are you wise and prudent?"

"In this matter, at least, I think I may say I am."

"And capable of keeping a secret?"

"Emphatically, yes."

"Then I will say that I was living at the hotel when you called on Captain Hawk, and by a mere chance I overheard your conversation with him. There was much in it that was of interest to me, and the idea of a young lady seeking in vain for tidings of her father was singularly sad. I have taken pains to learn something of the situation as the world knows it—I mean, merely, that there was such a firm as Tereston Brothers—and I could not help coming to see you and tender my sympathy."

The explanation was not the most striking of its kind, and Ionice looked somewhat puzzled, but she was not in the mood to rebuff any one who professed sympathy for her.

Her mood found expression, however, in the question:

"Then you can tell me nothing?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot, but may I make a suggestion?"

"Certainly."

"Why do you not engage a detective on the case?"

"A detective?"

"Yes."

"I had not thought of that."

"Something might be learned."

"With the views that Uncle Benjamin holds I think he would not approve of that."

"Would it be necessary to tell him?"

"Perhaps not—no; it would not."

Ionice brightened a little at the thought, though she did not seem wholly in love with the plan. Then she added:

"He would not agree to it, if he knew of

it, for he resents every claim of mine that harm may have come to my father."

"But what about this assertion of Benson's that he saw your father in the city?"

"I do not know what to make of it. He ought not to have been deceived, but if father was here he would come to me at once, I know."

"The detective might see Mr. Benson, could he not?"

"Yes."

"Then will you authorize me to engage a detective?"

"Do you know of one who will be honorable and trustworthy?"

"I do."

"Then let me see him."

"He is here now!"

"Here?"

"I am a detective."

Ionice was greatly surprised, and suspicion followed on the heels of the surprise.

"Who sent you here?"

"Nobody. Believe me, I am not here under cover. It is my personal interest in the matter, aroused by your talk with Hawk, and the fact that a prominent citizen of New York is thus missing, that has called me to your presence. I come simply as a friend, and should be very glad to help you. If you will let me enter your service I will gladly make the matter a personal, not a professional one. I do not want a dollar in the way of recompense unless my efforts succeed in restoring your father to you as he was."

It was a clear, frank and manly explanation. Detective Starr had been strongly impressed by the beauty, refinement, sorrow and many visible good qualities of the girl, and he had spoken less as an officer than as a man. Speaking thus he made an impression in return, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Your kindness is duly appreciated, and, since you have spoken as you have, I will let the matter of recompense pass, only saying that I am amply able to meet all financial calls, and that we will talk of that later."

"That is best."

"If you are a detective you must have an opinion as such," suddenly observed Ionice.

"But I need time to form one."

"You may be right."

"I hope your father will be restored to you all well and safe, but, since he is missing, will you tell me if you know of any possible motive any one could have had to do him injury?"

"I do not. He did not have an enemy."

For a long time after this the conversation was conducted, but it probed no deeper into the mystery. Steve asked many questions, and all were answered freely, but nothing gave light. Whatever had been back of the mystery, Ionice had no clue to it.

He asked skillfully about Lady Blanche, so as not to let her see that it was a matter of any moment, but found she had no knowledge of the race-track queen. It was the same with Asher Windam, except that she remembered him as a man who had spoken to her on board the Rose Addison.

When all had been learned that could be learned, the detective took his leave. He had seen enough of Ionice to feel sure he could trust her, and he marked out a programme with care.

Carefully he impressed upon her the need of keeping secret all that had been said between them, including the fact that he was to work for her. In fact, the plan, to which she readily agreed, was that she should not tell anybody that she had seen him, or that she knew of such a person.

She was to see him at intervals, outside the house, but without making any person her confidant.

When all had been arranged, Steve took his departure. He had gone to her in the hope that the mystery might be in some degree lessened, but, despite what she had been able to tell him, it was greater than before.

He considered the points.

"I fear she will never see her father alive," he thought. "The way in which he went out of sight, taken with the other events known to me, speaks only too plainly."

"Lady Blanche and Benjamin Tereston spoke of a 'crime' they had committed. Benjamin seems reluctant to have anything done to find his missing brother. Why?"

Why, unless he is afraid of the investigation? He is believed by Ionice to be a loving brother to Edmund Tereston. It does not look like it when he refuses to do a thing to find the missing man. Yet, he may have a detective on the track—

"No, for if that were so, he would not have employed me, an outsider, to look to Asher Windham. His 'crime' was against his brother. What was it? What can it have been but *murder*?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

TRAILING THE "RED ROVER."

STEVEDORE STEVE reached home and found a letter awaiting him. He opened it and read as follows:

"MY DEAR SIR:—I take pleasure in informing you that since I saw you I have gained the information I desired, and as a result I shall have no further need of your services. Owing to this abrupt termination of the case, I shall have no chance to express my appreciation of your work, but your well-known reputation is sufficient guarantee that all would have been well done if you had gone on.

"Herewith you will find fifty dollars in cash. I trust the amount will be deemed sufficient for your purpose. If it is not, please call on me, and I will satisfy you duly.

"With assurances of pleasure with our brief connection, and of consideration for you, I remain, sir, most sincerely yours,

"B. TERESTON.

"To R. STARR, Esq."

Steve laid down the letter and smiled quietly.

"So I am called off. Benjamin does not want Asher Windham investigated further. What does that mean, if not that Lady Blanche has got her hand on the throttle and shut off steam? Something of the kind has occurred, and I shall never draw any money from Benjamin further than what I have here. So be it—the fact does not prevent me from going on with my own work."

The detective rested his head on his hands and meditated for a long time. Finally he aroused, took out from his pocket a pencil and began to mark upon the back of Tereston's letter. When he had finished there was shown there two vessels, bark-rigged, and drawn with skill. He completed his work by printing upon one the name, Polly Ann, and on the other, Red Rover.

This done he looked at his pencil creations attentively and murmured:

"What is the connection between them?"

Another period of silence, and then he went on:

"Benjamin Tereston and Lady Blanche have had part in a 'crime' which is liable to send them to the gallows, as they confess. Edmund Tereston is strangely missing from the Polly Ann. Lady Blanche has had part in a tragedy on board the Red Rover. Was it the 'crime' which troubles Benjamin Tereston? In brief, why does the name of the Red Rover figure so much in connection with the Polly Ann? Blanche poses as the consignee of Red Rover's cargo, but I have heard her say it is only a pretense. Who, then, is the real consignee?"

Again a pause, and then the comment:

"Both the Polly Ann and the Red Rover sailed from Calcutta for New York with a cargo of spices, opium and indigo. Is there anything in that?"

Another pause, and then he put the paper away and rose.

"It will be well to get the history of the Red Rover."

He looked at his watch.

"I am too late to search any authority, today, but I know somebody whose mind is equal to that of the authorities."

Leaving the house he set out for a West Side street. He arrived in due time and inquired for Captain Rush. That person was out, but the detective sat down to wait. His patience was tried, but it was rewarded, at last. Captain Rush came—a big, bearded old man whose every look suggested the ocean and its hazards. His greeting was cheery.

"Glad to see you, my boy; glad to see you. I only hope you are not here to arrest me for any crime."

"I should as soon expect the statue of

George Washington on Wall street to commit a crime as you. Luckily, captain, you have a clear record."

"Ah! my boy, you don't know what a rascal I am. Can you swear I never was a pirate?"

"Why, you wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Then I am kinder hearted than the fly, for he is a reptile who often crawls on my bald head, to my wrath. A murderous pirate, he is. Ha! ha! Well, my boy, you should have been down on the docks with me, to-day. Nothing special, but the air of the ocean coming in strong. Reminded me of old times when I was a sailor in fact, and not a retired old foggy. Still, a foggy has his uses, chiefly as a terrible example. Ha! ha!"

"You keep up your interest in nautical matters, of course?"

"You bet!"

"And are as well posted as ever?"

"Hang it, yes! It never would do for a man to fall off, when all he is to the world is a reminiscence."

"I want information from you, captain. Did you ever hear of the bark Red Rover?"

"Did I? Ha! ha! You amuse me, lad."

"Then you do know of her it seems?"

"I have two reasons to know the Red Rover. First, she is now lying at a South street pier; second, I commanded her for three years."

"When? Where?"

"Left her six years ago. Sailed her between here and Calcutta."

"You did?"

"Surely, lad."

"Can you give me her history?"

"Well, I should say so. She's a Bristol-built craft—turned out by the same parties who built the Polly Ann that was wrecked a short time ago, and other vessels of note—the Maze, the John G. Pitcher, the Water Nimrod, and so on—and was a good one in her day. She's a bit groggy now, though you couldn't get her owners to admit it."

"Who owns her?"

"In my day it was Pierce & Cuppy, importers, but they sold her. I don't know who owns her now. That's a question I asked the Jack Tars on board her only the other day, but they couldn't, or wouldn't tell."

"To whom did Pierce & Cuppy sell her?"

"I don't know."

"Who commanded her after you?"

"Hank Warner."

"Where is he?"

"Don't know."

Steve was not getting ahead as he wished, and he relapsed into silence with a face so serious that the old salt suddenly added:

"What's up, my lad?"

"Captain, you are a discreet man. Will you promise to keep my investigation a profound secret if I will be a little more frank?"

"Why, sure, lad."

"I want to trace the Red Rover from the time Pierce & Cuppy sold her."

"Ought to be done easy."

"Do you know of Tereston Brothers & Brockway?"

"Yes."

"What about them?"

"I only now they are great importers, and have owned their own vessels, at times."

"Did they ever own the Red Rover?"

"Not that I know of."

"Or have any connection with her?"

"Never heard of any."

"Well, captain, I want to trace the craft from the time she left the hands of Pierce & Cuppy."

"Put on your hat and let us run over to Cuppy's. He's the boy to consult. No nonsense about him."

"I was thinking of seeing him, but it may be they sold the bark a long time ago."

"See him! He will tell all; he's half-sailor, himself, in his bones, and would do all he could. Come on!"

They left the house. Mr. Cuppy did not live near, and considerable more time was consumed, but they arrived, at last. They found Mr. Cuppy in, and he came to them in a breezy way much like Captain Rush's. Assuming merely to feel an interest in a craft he once commanded, and speaking freely because of long acquaintance, Rush asked him the desired question. Cuppy grew serious.

"I can't tell you, Cap."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know who you sold the Red Rover to?"

"No."

"Does your partner?"

"I'll end your wild guessing by telling all I know, and all that my partner knows. We sold the Red Rover to an unknown party, through an agent. The latter was instructed not to give the purchaser's name, and he kept the bargain to the letter. We sold, but we don't know who to. We were paid promptly, not by check, but in cash. Yes, we are as ignorant as you can be as to who bought the bark."

"What do you infer from that?"

"The owners didn't want their handiwork known, but why I don't know. She sailed for Calcutta, just the same as we had kept her going."

"How do you know?"

"We had the curiosity to watch, and we learned that it was so."

"When did you sell her?"

The host gave the exact date, adding:

"Figure on it and you'll see she has had just time to go to Calcutta and back. Well, she is now in port. Maybe you can learn there who owns her. By the way, there was something odd about the purchase."

CHAPTER XXIV.

STRUCK DOWN!

Thus far the conversation had been disappointing, despite the interesting assertion that the Red Rover had sailed for Calcutta—though that was something the inquirers had known before, of course—but the manner of the host gave promise of something more striking. He had brightened perceptibly, as if under a new idea.

"Very odd!" he repeated.

"What was it?" asked Captain Rush.

"The agent for the unknown was bound to have the Red Rover or nothing. We owned three vessels, the firm of Pierce & Cuppy did; and we liked to part from the Red Rover the least of all. She had the reputation of being a 'lucky' craft, and sailors who shipped in her, from captain down, felt cheery when on her deck. That's a good deal to men who risk their money in sending cargoes around as we do. So we told the agent when he came to us that we would sell any one of the three but the Red Rover."

"Still, you sold her."

"He was bound to have her."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"He gave a reason, didn't he?"

"Only that he liked her."

Stevedore Steve spoke for the first time.

"Do you make a practice of selling vessels?"

"No."

"Then why did he come to you to buy, at all?"

"That I don't know, but he was bound to have her. I told him she was not for sale, and added that there were other vessels in port built by the same parties. 'Now,' said I, 'there is the Polly Ann, owned by Tereston Brothers & Brockway. Try them!'"

"What did he say to that?"

"Said the Polly Ann was not for sale. 'Neither is the Red Rover,' I told him. Well, we sold her just the same, for he hung on like grim death, and paid us our price when we set it. The odd part is that he was bound to have the Red Rover and none other."

"Who was this agent?"

"I don't remember his name, or where he hung out, and I'm not sure we have any papers to show. We got our money, gave him a receipt, and away he went. That's all I know."

"He had tried to buy the Polly Ann, you say?"

"He said so; I know no more."

"Made by the same parties," added Rush.

The last information had been given before, that evening, and each time the statement had fallen on Steve's ears forcibly. Why were the names of the two barks constantly associated?

Mr. Cuppy had spun his thread, and the investigators soon left him. On the way home a long silence was broken by Rush with the question:

"Say, you don't s'pose et was Tereston Brothers who bought the bark, do you?"

"Why do you suggest that?"

"No reason, only they owned the Polly Ann, and must have known the Red Rover was of the same pattern."

Steve did not follow the subject further, but, more than ever, he was led to wonder at the constantly recurring association of the names and identity of the two barks.

Granted that Rush's suggestion was correct—that Tereston Brothers had purchased the Red Rover—what did it indicate?

The ex-captain glanced curiously at Steve's face as they walked on, but did not interrupt the thoughtful mood into which the detective had fallen until Rush's residence was reached. There they said good-night, and then Steve went on alone. He was still meditative, and scarcely conscious of his surroundings until he was aroused by the sound of rapid footsteps.

A man rounded the nearest corner at a run, and he was coming straight toward Steve until he saw the detective. Then he diverged from his course, took the opposite side of the street and hurried on at the same speed.

Ordinarily the detective might have stopped such a suspicious character, but he was now in a mood when he did not feel like meddling with more than he had on hand, so he let the man go unchallenged.

He had, however, seen his face, and, somehow, it impressed itself strongly on Steve's mind.

He resumed his way, but had advanced but a short distance beyond the corner when he caught sight of a man lying on the sidewalk. The sight awakened sudden suspicion, and he hurried forward.

There lay the man, and there was something about him which led Steve to believe he was no drunken wanderer of the night. The person lay partly on his face, and the detective turned him over. This done he started back in surprise.

"Captain Hawk!" he exclaimed.

The mariner it was, and it was one of the strange things of the case that he should come into sight again so mysteriously.

Again Steve bent over him, and a brief examination satisfied him of two things. Hawk was not drunk, but he was insensible. Just then a voice sounded above.

"Hallo, podner!"

Steve looked up to the open window.

"Ah! is that you, Pardon Gallup?"

"Sure, Mike!" the sandwich man replied.

"Do you live here?"

"Jest now, I do."

"Come down here and help me carry this man in. I know him."

"Sure, Mike!"

The speaker disappeared, but soon returned and opened the door. By that time Steve was uncertain about the wisdom of getting Hawk into such disreputable quarters as the house seemed to be, but he did not want to lose sight of him, and no policeman was in sight.

He gave directions, and Hawk was carried in between them. He was laid on the sandwich man's bed, which was a very uncouth affair of its kind, and then the detective began to think more clearly.

"I think this man has been the victim of an assault," he remarked.

"I know et," returned Pardon.

"You do?"

"Rather! Seen et done."

"When did it occur?"

"Only a bit ago. The feller run around the corner where you come from. When you hove in sight I thought et was him come back ter finish his job. But ef he has kept up his gait he's a mile away by now. He run like a mad bull on a rampage."

"If you saw it done why didn't you interfere?"

"I did."

"How?"

"I leaned out o' the winder and I says ter him: 'Stop et! There's a cross-eyed cop comin', an' that's a sign o' bad luck.'"

"Make yourself clear, man."

"Et was like this: I was settin' in the winder when along come this duck. Close

after him come the other duck. T'other one was on the gain, an' ez they got here he overtook this one, an' he sneaked up behind him an' everlastin'ly belted him over the head with somethin'—et was a sand-bag or slung-shot—an' down dropped this chap. The red slayer put up his hand fer another crack, but then I chipped in with the remark afore-said."

"And then?"

"He skipped."

"Left his prey?"

"You kin see he didn't take him."

"Be sensible. I mean, did he run at once, without—"

"Skipped immediate."

"Then you have no clue to the motive of the attack?"

"No."

Steve bent over the captain to see if there was any sign of recovery, and Pardon fell to rubbing his chin vigorously. Suddenly he broke forth:

"Say, I hev an idee."

"What is it?"

"I believe the feller who did the swipin' was the same lark who come with the beautiful damsel to the bark the night the murder was done there."

Steve abruptly confronted the sandwich man.

"Do you think so?"

"Sure, Mike!"

"Don't deal in romances, now."

"I'm givin' et to ye straight. I didn't think, before, that I could place that jigger, ef I seen him again, but when I got my glimmer on this sandbagger I see a familiar something. Couldn't place et first off, but I am on now. Sure, Mike! et was the same duck."

Pardon was so sincere in his manner that Steve was convinced in spite of himself, and he had to grapple with a new conundrum. Why should the conspirator of the Red Rover seek to kill the captain of the wrecked Polly Ann?

"Say!" cried the sandwich man, "he's comin' back ter life!"

The speaker pointed to Hawk, and as Steve again turned he saw that such was the fact. The mariner gave signs of recovery, and Steve registered a vow.

If such a thing was possible the mariner should be made to talk to the point, and give light on the mystery.

CHAPTER XXV.

NEWS OF THE POLLY ANN.

THE detective worked over Hawk for several minutes, and then the eyes of the mariner unclosed. He looked around the room.

"How do you feel, captain?" inquired Stevedore Steve.

Hawk turned his regard upon the questioner.

"How's the wind?" he demanded, sharply.

"All right."

"How does she blow?"

"North by nor'-east," and Steve smiled slightly.

"Pipe all hands!"

"It is done."

"The bark seems to roll quietly. Is there no hope of a storm? What says the barometer?"

"Gray to the top, sir."

"Good! We'll have a storm. I want it! Send all the men below, and give them enough grog to make them boozy."

Early in this contradictory conversation, which Steve had carried on with some difficulty, owing to the fact that he knew nothing of nautical matters, he had seen that the captain was not in his right mind. Plainly, he imagined himself on board a ship, and it was certain that the street-assailant's blow had done damage.

Hawk rolled his eyes oddly and went on with his rambling words.

"This night the Polly Ann goes to the bottom," he declared.

Steve started.

"Do you think she will sink, sir?"

Hawk turned a pair of wild eyes upon Pardon Gallup, and then sharply commanded:

"Stand back, boy!"

"Eh?" muttered the sandwich man, startled.

"Stand back! The place of a cabin boy

is not where he can listen to his captain. Stand back, or I'll give you two days in the brig!"

Pardon did not know what the "brig" was, in this sense, but he condescended to obey meekly. Then Hawk again looked at Steve and motioned him to come nearer. He seized the detective's arm and drew him so close that his lips almost touched Steve's ear. Then he hissed in a whisper:

"The bark is to be scuttled!"

"What?" gasped the detective.

"Scuttled, sir!"

"What bark?"

"Why, fool, it's the Polly Ann!"

Stevedore Steve's blood was flowing rapidly. He did not believe this was all delirium, or, rather, that it was without foundation. Beset with the idea that he was getting a leaf out of the past he replied:

"When is it to be done?"

"As soon as the storm comes up. There must be an excuse. You and I know the stanch Polly Ann can outride any storm, but others don't. The storm will be the excuse for her fate."

"And we are to scuttle her?"

"Ay, ay."

"How will you do it, sir?"

"An auger will riddle her bottom easily."

"Why should we sink her?"

"Hush! Ask not too many questions."

"What will Tereston Brothers say?"

"Ha! ha!—good! Very good! Yes, what will they say? Ha! ha!"

Hawk seemed to be convulsed with mirth, though when he laughed his reason-deserted eyes still gleamed so wildly and unpleasantly that the sandwich man backed off a little further willingly.

"If she sinks," went on the detective, insinuatingly, "her owners will call you to account."

"Ha! ha!"

Again the wild laugh, but the mariner suddenly grew serious and stern.

"Never you mind who likes it or who don't. I am commander here, and I take all responsibility of sinking the Polly Ann. I know what I am doing. She's to be scuttled!"

"I have heard it said one of her owners is on board."

"Have you? Ha! ha! And have you seen him?"

"No."

"You will not."

"Where is he?"

"Not on board my craft."

"But you know where he is?"

"What of it?" fiercely retorted Hawk. "I do know, but it is not for you to know. Understand me, in all I do I obey orders. Come nearer—nearer, now!"

With a strong pull the mariner brought Steve so close to him that he fairly spoke in his ear as he mysteriously added:

"There is a secret—a deep secret, man. Don't worry about Edmund Tereston, for there's no need. Ha! ha! this is the most eventful voyage the Polly Ann ever made—ay, and the last."

"But where is Edmund Tereston—"

"Stop! Not another word, for I will not hear it. Ay, and see to it you tell no one of the plans of the night. The Polly Ann is to be scuttled, but the crew will be none the wiser."

"Why will she be scuttled?" persisted Steve.

"Fool! ask me that again and I will brain you!" almost shouted the captain. "All that is my business. Not another word, now. Look at the barometer, and let me know as soon as there is signs of a storm. The Polly Ann is on her last voyage."

The detective saw that it was useless to pursue the subject then, but he did not despair. Reason had deserted Hawk's mind, and in his wild wanderings he might yet tell the story further. Steve believed he had gained much already.

All this talk about the scuttling of the bark might be random fancy, but he did not believe it. He was sure he had advanced another step in the solution of the mystery—sure that the Polly Ann had really been sunk thus when she went down.

But why?

And who had been back of the plot?

And what were the facts in regard to Edmund Tereston?

Hawk closed his eyes and seemed to become oblivious to what was transpiring around him, and Steve first whispered to Pardon Gallup and then sent him out on an errand. A doctor must be had for the mariner. Such a step, then, might possibly shut off the mutterings which he had indulged in, but the detective felt that he was not done with Hawk, if his life could be saved and he could be kept in custody.

The doctor came. The captain did not object to his presence, or to an examination, and the latter was duly made.

The result was that the man of medicine pronounced the injury serious. The blow had evidently been given with a slung shot, and while it did not seem that there was a fracture of the skull, there was some sort of injury to the brain which might end disastrously.

Medicines were perscribed, purchased and secured, and Hawk had the benefit of the care of his impromptu nurses. Steve did not intend to leave him for awhile. Pardon Gallup showed unexpected skill as a nurse, and the detective decided that he must be paid to look out for Hawk, since some one must do so.

The mariner fell into a troubled sleep and several hours passed uneventfully.

His companions took turns in watching, the other sleeping in the meanwhile, so that neither would get exhausted.

Toward morning the captain became conscious, but his mind still wandered. He gazed around the room and then beckoned to Steve. Sinking his voice to a mysterious whisper, he inquired:

"Have you seen any of the police?"

"No," Steve replied.

"I think New York will be too hot for us."

"Why?"

"There will be an investigation, and I fear it."

"Why need you?"

"Fool! what if they suspect the Polly Ann was scuttled?" irritably demanded the captain.

"Why should they?"

"Such things are looked to sharply."

"Where are the rest of your crew?"

"Places have been secured for the few who came on to New York, and they have been packed off to other ports as fast as possible. Some have dropped out of sight, themselves, and it is them we have to dread most. They may know too much, though the bark was scuttled skillfully, and I think they are ignorant. Then there is Blanche."

Hiding his eagerness the detective asked:

"What of her?"

"A woman!" declared Hawk. "Woman-like, she is liable to get us into trouble. She is reckless, like all of her sex. Their rule is to do risky things and trust that they will not be found out. 'Trust' is the biggest word in a woman's dictionary of life, and the one that makes the most trouble for her and everybody else. I fear Blanche may betray us."

"Who else knows of the scuttling?"

A cunning look came to the captain's face.

"Don't you wish you knew?" he mocked.

"Well, you won't; the secret will be kept. Ha! ha! I am not fool enough to put my head in a noose!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ASSAILANT.

CAPTAIN HAWK was wary, and all of the detective's skill was not sufficient to lure him on to rash confession. His mind was under a cloud, but cunning took the place of reason and, for the time, at least, was just as effective.

Soon after day-dawn the captain again sunk into troubled slumber, and Steve left him to Pardon Gallup's care, after seeing that the bills of the sandwich man and his charge were paid.

Pardon was a vagabond, but he had a vein of good in his nature, and this was so paired with laziness that, when he saw a chance to get his living for the time simply by acting as nurse, he caught at the chance eagerly.

"You will send me word if there is any change," directed Steve.

"I will, general," Pardon promised.

"Also, listen to all you hear, and if there is an important revelation do not forget it."

"I won't."

"It will pay you well to be faithful."

"I hope so," candidly replied Pardon.

"Then I can depend on you?"

"Sure, Mike!"

Steve was not wholly satisfied, but he felt that he must depend on the sandwich man for the time, and so he went away with what faith he could muster.

Hawk's mutterings had done much to enlighten him, for he felt sure the speech of the man had been to the point, even if it was so clouded in its mental origin. Believing this he had to confront the fact, he thought, that the Polly Ann had been scuttled by the mariner before she sunk in mid-ocean.

It was a belief of prodigious force, and almost bewildering. If he believed thus much, he must also believe that Hawk was acting as agent for somebody else when he did the deed, and the great question was—Who?

Who had wanted the Polly Ann scuttled? That Blanche had some share in it seemed certain, but she could not be the only one. Who else was there that would wish it? who, that would profit by it? The bark had gone down with all her cargo. Who had won, and who had lost?

At first it might have seemed an act of professional jealousy, to injure Tereston Brothers & Brockway, but the detective happened to know that Blanche and Benjamin Tereston were good friends, and that they had done some "crime" together.

Singular complication!

Steve was proceeding with lowered head when he almost collided with a man, who first laughed and then greeted him cordially. It was Mr. Cuppy.

"Say," cried the latter, "I believe I have news for you."

"What is it?"

"I have learned something about how the Red Rover was fitted up for the next voyage after we sold her to the mysterious unknown."

"What is it?"

"I have seen a man who furnished things for her, and he says he received his pay from Rand Brockway, who is the younger member of the firm of Tereston Brothers & Brockway. The latter gave a name other than Brockway when he paid, but, unknown to him, my informant was acquainted with his appearance, and he knows it was Brockway himself."

"Mr. Cuppy, what does this indicate?"

"What do you think?"

"I should say, emphatically, that it shows Tereston Brothers & Brockway to have been the purchasers of the Red Rover."

"Just so."

"Why should they make such a secret of it?"

"Yes, why?"

"Possibly they wished to enlarge their trade on the quiet."

"Ha! ha! Do you think so? Well, I may be so, but from my knowledge of Brockway, I am inclined to be suspicious. The Terestons have always borne a good name, and Edmund is as fine a man as I know, but I don't like that Brockway. Who knows what methods he has introduced into the affairs of the firm?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, but when a firm gets to doing things so on the sly, I am not inclined to sit down and swear they are angels, simply on faith. I should want proof of it."

Mr. Cuppy might have desired more proof if he had known all Steve did about the case.

"Why need they be so confounded secret?" added the speaker.

"It seems sure they were the purchasers of the Red Rover, but that proves nothing against them," replied Steve, who did not want Cuppy to give too much thought to the subject.

"It don't prove anything in their favor, by Judas!"

With this emphatic comment the jovial Mr. Cuppy went his way. The detective wandered on toward his destination.

"Why did they want the Red Rover?" he murmured. "Why was the Polly Ann scuttled? Where is Edmund Tereston?"

Profound questions, and not yet to be answered.

Seeking Hick Peters, Steve spent considerable time with him; then they went out to-

gether. They were wandering along when Hick suddenly grasped Steve's arm.

"There's our beauty!" he explained.

"Where?"

"In the carriage."

Steve looked, and he saw Lady Blanche driving a span of fine horses with the skill of an old hand.

"She's a clipper craft!" declared Hick.

There was no reply.

"Ever see a better looker?"

Still no reply.

"Hallo! do you see a ghost?"

Surprised at getting no answer Hick looked up for the first time. He saw Steve regarding the occupants of the carriage with an intentness which was very marked.

The detective did not see a ghost, but he did see something quite as interesting. Lady Blanche was not alone in the carriage. She had a male companion; a man well though somewhat flashily dressed; and in this man the detective recognized a familiar face.

Whoever he might be he was none other than the person who had struck down Captain Hawk the previous night.

It was another and important link in the chain, and Steve made a rapid decision.

"Hick, I leave you here; I am going to follow them. Here! are you at liberty?"

The question was addressed to a cabman who stood idle near at hand, and as he was not engaged the detective was soon in the vehicle and rolling away in pursuit. Evidently the ride of the leaders had been nearly finished, for in a short time they drew up before Lady Blanche's flat, the carriage was dismissed, and they entered.

Steve asked himself a question:

"Can I gain access to the vacant flat which I used before? It must be tried."

It was tried, and with success. The new janitor was out of the way, and the house in charge of the same people who had helped Mullen and Steve before. As a result, the detective was not long in getting into the vacant flat.

He found every thing as he had left it on the previous occasion, and he quickly but silently mounted the bench so as to reach the transom. In the other flat Blanche and her companion had already sat down. She was in high spirits, but he did not share the mood. She saw this and commented on it.

"Why are you so pokey?" she asked, irritably.

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"Well, I think there is reason. I don't like the situation."

"Why not?"

"There are too many weak points. The trouble with your plan has been from the first just what I pointed out at the beginning—it is too top-heavy; there were too many in it."

"Man-like, you rely upon woman to do the fine work and then get cranky over it."

"Don't sulk, Blanche. There's one thing must not happen, and that is that we fall out. The plotters must stick to each other."

"Then be just to me," snapped the race-track queen.

"Am I not?"

"Well, Ansel, you may mean well, but I don't like to be trod on."

Steve grew more interested. After hearing a good deal about Ansel Armstrong it seemed that he saw that person, at last.

"We are all in the same boat, and we should be patient. It is to your interest to be patient when I say that I fear the having of so many allies as we have."

"You say you will remove Hawk—"

"I have tried it and failed."

"Failed!"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I was interrupted in my work. Hawk still lives, and he is more than ever dangerous, since he may suspect who tried to put him out of the way. He is a living menace to you, to me and to Ben Tereston!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN UNTIMELY CALL.

"AHA!"

It was with this low-toned exclamation that Steve greeted the introduction of the name of Benjamin Tereston into the conversation. He grew deeply wrapped up

in what was being said, for he felt that some rash speech of the pair in the next room might put him in possession of the key to the more profound mysteries of the case.

"Where is Hawk, now?" asked Blanche.

"I don't know. I crept up behind him on the street and felled him with a slung-shot. Of course I should have finished it all, but some one cried out to me from a window above us. Naturally, I fled."

"Coward! where was your nerve?" cried Blanche.

"What would you have done?" demanded Ansel, warmly.

"Finished the work."

"And been caught?"

"Bah! a few blows would have settled it all, and then you could have gone at your leisure."

"Well planned!" sneered Ansel.

"You were not fitted for the job."

"You should have sent some of the thugs with whom you associated before I lifted you out of the mire."

"At least, they never made a botch of a job."

"You can go back to them."

"Now, Ansel, don't get angry—"

"I am. I married you and gave you luxuries you never knew before. I raised you from poverty and the company of thugs to what you now are. It was you who led me into all this work. But for you the bark would now be afloat, and Ben Tereston and I would have lighter minds. You have led; and I have followed like a pug dog tied to a string. Yes, and like a dog I am kicked."

Cunning Blanche crossed over and took a seat in Ansel's lap.

"My dear one," she cooed, "if I have wronged you I am very sorry, but I have been used to prompt action. Please don't hold hard feelings; I am very sorry there is anything to annoy you. Won't you forgive me?"

Even from where he was Steve could see tears glisten in her eyes—tears the nature of which it was not hard to understand—and he anticipated the reply. It was what he had thought; the man in the case was moved by those tears and a reconciliation was at once effected.

Blanche continued to coo until she had her triumph fully assured, and then they became more practical.

"What became of Hawk?" she asked.

"I left him on the street, and, as the morning papers have no mention of him, it is safe to assume that he was not severely injured."

"Did he recognize you?"

"I think not."

"Let us hope not."

"He is still at liberty, and I fear the man. If, as I have suspected, he meditates treachery, he can ruin you and me, and Ben Tereston."

"He must be removed!" declared Blanche.

The woman was no longer beautiful to look upon. Her contracted brows were ominous and ugly, and Steve Starr wondered that such a woman could have obtained the hold that she possessed over Ansel Armstrong—a man who, whatever his errors and crimes might be, was manifestly her superior in all things but cunning.

Replying to the last remark Ansel feebly asked:

"How can it be done?"

"Leave that to me. Hawk shall be removed. Now, is there more that troubles you?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"I am worried about that detective I brought into the case."

"You were a fool to do it."

"Granted, but I thought it best. We suspected this man who was so interested in trade in India—this Asher Windham, whoever he is."

"You should have consulted me at the start. As soon as I heard of him I recognized him as the erratic friend of one of my friends, and told you so."

"Yes, and then I told Ben Tereston that he need not fear Windham, and Ben dismissed the detective. But I fear that man!"

"Starr?"

"Yes."

"Why should he care about this matter, or know of it?"

"He was represented to me as a detective who had no conscience. I now know this was untrue, and that he is one of the most dangerous men on the city force. Suppose that he learned a good deal of us before he was called off?"

"Have you any evidence to that effect?"

"No."

"Then let us dismiss him."

"He may not be so willing to be dismissed, but we will hope for the best. Next, there is the position of the partners of the firm of Tereston Brothers & Brockway. We know what Rand Brockway thinks, and he need not be dwelt upon here—"

"I hope his nerve is good?"

"As good as mine!" declared Ansel.

"But Ben Tereston is frightened. Our plot has gone further than Ben ever believed it would, and he is badly rattled. He wishes the Polly Ann was again afloat."

"Fools, all of you!" cried Blanche, impatiently. "Men boast of their strength, but they are weak, very weak. One bold woman will do more, dare more and see more than a dozen men!"

Ansel was silent, but Steve could guess what was in his mind. It was plain that Blanche was of that class of women who risk all recklessly and trust to luck.

She had brought Ansel into trouble, and he was not prepared to commend her rash ways.

"I must see Ben again," added the race-track queen.

Ansel said nothing.

"Or is he down on me?"

"He regrets the whole business, I think."

"Blames me, eh?"

"Perhaps so."

"Just like a man! They all make me tired. Blames me! Why, all would have been well but for the mistakes of others. Edmund Tereston ought never to have been allowed to sail from Calcutta on the bark."

Steve grew doubly alert.

"Well, he did sail," added Ansel, gloomily.

"Unfortunately, he did."

"The dickens he did!" thought the detective. "So he sailed on the bark—ay, but what bark?"

They were on the verge, perhaps, of saying what would have given light in full, but at that moment there was a knock at the door. Ansel sat near to it, and he rose promptly to answer.

"Wait—"

So began Blanche, but Ansel had already turned the knob, and a sight was presented which made Blanche change color. Asher Windham was there.

Asher coolly pushed by Ansel and looked only at Blanche.

"Hallo, my darling!" he exclaimed.

"How are ye? Looking like a red, red rose, by Jove! Called to see you without warning, but couldn't keep my wishes under control. Had to see you or bust. See?"

It was a speech very unlike Asher, but the explanation was clear. It needed but one good look to see that the man of the world had forgotten that strong drink was a mockery—in brief, that he had sampled it too freely and was under its influence.

He was very good humored, and stood there gazing serenely at Blanche, while her color whiffled around from red to pale.

"Have to see my charmer once in a while, engagement or no engagement," persisted Asher. "Hence, here I am. See?"

Ansel was not so happy as the intoxicated man. He was gazing at Asher, and flashing glances at Blanche between the other looks, and he had nothing to encourage him. Blanche had the nerve of a sphinx, usually, but she was so agitated, now, that Ansel would have been dull not to grow more than suspicious.

He spoke sharply.

"Blanche, what does this mean?" he demanded.

"This man," she faltered, "is—is—"

"Asher Windham, at your service, late from Calcutta, and elsewhere," serenely replied the rover.

"Asher Windham!" exclaimed Ansel.

"That's me. Who are you?" inquired Asher, calmly.

Dark was Ansel's face.

"Blanche, why is that man here?" he demanded.

"Come to see my honey!" explained the adventurer.

Blanche found her tongue.

"How distressing this is!" she cried, trying to be natural. "Mr. Windham is a friend of my friend, and I feel sure she would be grieved to see him in this condition—"

"Oh! come, now, old girl, what are you giving us?" inquired Asher. "I don't know any friend of yours, but I do know you, and you are a ton of rose-leaves distilled with care. All sweetness, by Jove!"

"So this is your way!" sharply commented Ansel.

"Her way is what she pleases," asserted Asher. "You hush your racket, old man, for I won't have it. I am boss here—when one Ansel Armstrong ain't around. Then I have to play second fiddle!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CLIMAX AMONG KNAVES.

REASON had deserted Asher, and he seemed bound to do all the damage he could. Blanche had managed to give him a good many silent hints, but he was blind to them all, and she saw that if he went on she would be wholly exposed and get no reward in return.

"The man is drunk as a lord!" she exclaimed, turning to Ansel. "We can't endure this, if he is a friend of my friend. Put him out!"

"One moment," replied Ansel, stiffly. "I want to know more of this gentleman. He says he is boss here when Ansel Armstrong isn't around. I want that explained; I want to know—"

"You shall directly."

Blanche's eyes were flashing with anger, and she now made a forward movement and laid her hands on Asher. The next thing that rash adventurer knew he was whirled toward the door. He was sober enough to have considerable muscle left, but she was for the time being gifted with man-like strength, and, before he could make any decisive resistance, he was whirled out of the room and into the hall.

The door closed; the key clicked; he was locked out.

Blanche stood before Ansel with flushed cheeks.

"If you can't defend our home I can!" she declared.

"Defend it? I should say the defense should have come before he entered it. This man—"

"You let him come here and insult me—"

"But, Blanche—"

"And never raised a hand in my defense!"

"We will speak of that when you have told me—"

"He insulted me grossly, and you never did one thing to prevent it!"

Steve had been wholly uncertain as to his own course. When he saw Asher so violently expelled he clearly foresaw that it would be the end of the friendly relations between him and Blanche. She had allowed him to call on her and kept him out of Ansel's sight. As long as that had been done all went well, but his present condition had blinded him to prudence and the crash had come.

Now, it was clear that he would be her enemy.

Would it be best to follow him and seek to penetrate his secrets, or remain and listen further to the couple in the room?

Having to decide quickly the detective remained.

He learned nothing of importance.

Blanche was cunning enough to see that she had a big job on hand to quiet Ansel's suspicions. The first step she took was to assume anger and grief because of his asserted neglect. Instead of allowing him to take the offensive he was put on the defense, and the way she managed it was a model of skill.

Before it was over Steve wished he had followed Asher, but it was too late. He kept his place and saw peace established—

peace, though Ansel's brow did not wholly clear, and it was plain that he did not accept her explanation fully.

The peace might prove a hollow one.

When they were done with this affair the more important one was renewed. After a considerable delay Ansel went away, and then there was no more for the detective to hear or see.

He quietly left the house, pondering over what he had heard.

"So Edmund Tereston sailed on 'the bark,'" he thought. "That fact seems to be established, but, as there is abundant evidence that he did not sail on the Polly Ann, the inference is that he came on the Red Rover. What became of him then?"

Did not the scenes known to have occurred on the Red Rover since she lay at the New York pier answer the question?

And yet, if he came on the Red Rover, why had Hick Peters been wholly ignorant of the fact?

The detective's course was toward his office. When he entered the building he was met by a servant who announced:

"A girl in your room to see you, sir."

"Who is it?"

"She wouldn't give any name, sir."

It was not necessary when the room was reached, for Steve immediately recognized Carma Petresso.

"Hallo! is it you?" he cried. "I am glad to see you."

"You ought ter be," she answered.

"Of course, for we are friends."

"I don't mean that."

"What, then?"

"You want to look out fer Mike, the stevedore."

"Why?"

"He's goin' ter do you up."

"Amiable Mike!"

"You won't laugh when he does it."

"I surely shall not. Being 'done up' is an operation which never gives rise to pleasurable emotions. But how did you learn all this?"

"Mike has talked with my father."

"So Trezzo is again on deck?"

"No, he ain't, fer he's so afraid of bein' arrested that he dassent go near the fruit-stand. I have to do all the work, with Bertina Ambugoso to help me."

"Tell me about this matter, Carma."

"It all happened at the house. They talked and didn't know I was hearing them, but I guess it wouldn't have made much difference, anyhow, for they don't know I am your friend. I took it all in, and I heard Mike say he would see that you were out of the way in a very few days."

"Why is he so bitter against me?"

"It's all on account of the business on board of the Red Rover."

"Go on!"

"It seems that when the man was killed there that Pardon Gallup has told about, Mike and two other stevedores got onto it by chance. They were paid to keep still, but Mike was suspicious of the others. He got them out on the balcony, under your window, and then let the balcony loose by a contrivance he had, and dropped them to the sidewalk."

"I know of that affair."

"They are still in the hospital, and not likely to recover their senses while they live."

"But Mike?"

"He tried to kill you once, an' he will do it again."

"What is his plan?"

"He didn't say."

"I will be ready for him. But, Carma, didn't you hear anything which would explain what really happened on board the Red Rover, that night?"

"Yes, I did. The man who was killed there wasn't a sailor, but some rich man, and he had come on the bark from Calcutta."

"Did you hear that said in plain words?"

"Well, I know he came here as I said, an' I s'pose he wasn't a sailor. They didn't speak of him as one."

"Did you hear his name?"

"I can't think of the whole of it, for it was a queer one, but it begun with Edmund! He has a brother Ben who liked him awful an' didn't want to hurt him, but it had to be done. Ben shed tears over it, Mike said,

Mike wasn't tole all these names, but he got onter them, somehow."

"Why did it have to be done?"

"That's what puzzles Mike. He don't know."

"Is there more, Carma?"

"No."

"Think carefully."

"That's all."

"What was done with the man who was killed?"

"I don't know."

"Strangel" muttered Steve.

"Now I've tol' all I can, an' I'll hev to go back ter the fruit-stand. Jest you keep an eye open fer Mike, fer he will be after you like a tiger after a mouse!"

Carma may have been a little at fault as to the favorite prey of the tiger, but there was no doubt as to her sincerity, and Steve not only thanked her but gave her something more substantial in the way of reward. She went with a dollar in her hand, and a smile on her face.

She left Steve in a meditative mood.

"So a man named Edmund came on the Red Rover, and he had a brother Ben. All this falls into line, and there is no getting around certain facts."

"Benjamin Tereston, Blanche and that crew plotted to do certain things. The Polly Ann was scuttled for some reason—I think I begin to see what. Edmund Tereston went down in the wreck, but not that wreck. He did not come on the lost bark, but on the Red Rover."

"He met with violence when he reached this port. Ben was so sorry that he shed tears, but it had to be done. Edmund Tereston has gone down like the Polly Ann, wrecked."

"Why need he be slain?"

"Why was he so much in the way of the conspirators? I can only infer that he was made of more honorable stuff, and that they removed him as a measure of safety."

"Upon my word, this is as pretty a kettle of knavery as I ever saw. Little did Hick Peters think what he was leading up to when he came to the police station with the simple announcement that Ben Bipps was missing from the bark."

"And now, how am I to get the links of the chain that are lacking?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN OCEAN VOYAGER CALLS.

IONICE TERESTON was alone in the parlor when a servant brought a card to her with this explanation:

"A gentleman would like to see one of the family."

Ionice read the name.

"Morris Amerson. I do not know him," she added, wearily, "but you can show him in."

He entered, and when she saw him a part of her indifference disappeared. He was a fine-looking old gentleman, with every indication that he was of high rank in life. He bowed courteously.

"Miss Tereston?" he questioned.

"Yes, sir."

"Daughter of whom? if I may ask."

"Daughter of Edmund Tereston, sir."

"Ah! may I ask where your father now is?"

"I do not know, sir; he went abroad."

"But returned."

"We have not seen him yet."

"No?"

"No, sir."

"Why, he sailed from Calcutta two weeks ahead of me," and Mr. Amerson seemed much surprised.

"Do you know him?"

"We met in Calcutta, and were to meet here, again."

"He has not arrived."

"But the Polly Ann sailed two weeks before I left."

"Was he going on the Polly Ann, sir?"

"He did go."

Emphatic was the assertion of the speaker, and it set Ionice into a mood of agitation.

"How do you know he did?" she asked.

"Why, because I went on board with him, and saw his stuff there, too; and the bark had only two hours to wait when I left him."

"The Polly Ann?"

"Yes, the Polly Ann. My dear, why are you so much agitated? Let me hope nothing is wrong?"

"The Polly Ann was lost at sea, sir, and they assure me that my father was not on board, at all."

"The bark lost? I had not heard of that. But it can't be your father was lost. If any one was saved they would have looked out for an owner. Why, they are rattled, somehow. There is a mistake. Tereston can't have gone down thus. Nonsense! nonsense! Some mistake, my dear, I tell you. Now, if I could see Captain Hawk— Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"You have an uncle?"

"Yes, sir."

"If I could see him—"

The parlor door opened and Benjamin Tereston walked in. He had just come home from business, and entered the room without a suspicion that anything was occurring out of the common run. He stopped on seeing a stranger, and would have retreated, but he was not given the chance.

"Uncle Benjamin," exclaimed Ionice, "will you please see this gentleman? He has brought us singular news of father."

"Yes, right from Calcutta," added Amerson.

The two statements fell with force upon Benjamin Tereston's ears. Taken together with Ionice's peculiar air of eagerness they seemed to imply a good deal.

"If anybody says Edmund Tereston did not sail from Calcutta on the Polly Ann it is a tremendous fiction!" added Amerson.

Benjamin's color changed with regularity and conspicuous vitality.

"What?" he managed to say feebly.

"I saw him on board," persisted Amerson.

"So you see he really did sail," pursued Ionice, looking at Benjamin.

"Yes, and he must have been known as himself to all on board," supplemented Amerson. "Who is telling such confounded lies about it, and where is your brother now?"

Benjamin might have sat as an artist's model for Cain when that person was asked a like question. Benjamin was bewildered and frightened, but he managed to ask the stranger to sit down and explain what he meant. Ionice watched the changing face keenly as this was done, and a startling thought came to her.

Could it be he was sorry to hear what might be good news of his brother? Surely, Amerson seemed to have frightened him.

"Ex-plain," faltered Benjamin.

Amerson had a clear conscience, and he did explain in a straightforward way which could leave no doubt. He declared he had met the now-missing man in Calcutta, and that they had become so friendly that he had not only agreed to see Mr. Tereston in New York, but had accompanied him to the bark Polly Ann and seen him ensconced there.

"Impossible!" declared Benjamin.

"My friend, I have made a simple statement. You say impossible! What do I understand by that?"

"Sir, I beg your pardon. I did not intend to cast doubt on your statement, but merely to say that something must have happened to prevent him from sailing."

"So something may have caused the earth to stand still and shake hands with the sun, that day, but I don't believe it."

"Captain Hawk says he was not on board at all," added Ionice.

"Then Captain Hawk is a confounded liar!" declared Amerson. "Why, Edmund Tereston introduced me to Hawk, and we had a drink all around."

Benjamin Tereston looked as if he had aged ten years in so many minutes. He never had heard of Amerson before, but it was plain that the returned traveler was one feature of the case which had been overlooked by those who did know of it.

"Uncle Benjamin!" spoke Ionice.

Feebly the importer replied:

"Yes."

"Have you been deceiving me?"

"No, no, child."

"Then who is guilty of lying?"

Benjamin wished to say it was Hawk, but he did not dare to. Not knowing that Hawk

was in trouble he did not want to bring up a question of veracity.

"I don't know," he tremulously replied.

"We have proof, now, that father did sail. Can he"—the girl's face paled at the thought—"can he have been murdered?"

Benjamin started nervously.

"No, no."

"That Hawk would kill his own brother, I do believe!" declared the visitor, firmly.

"Kill who?"

"His own brother!"

Benjamin wished he had not asked the question. His color became a most unpleasant ashen hue. Ionice regarded him in absolute terror. She felt there was some horrible mystery behind all this, and she was moved as she had rarely been. The face before her was one of guilt, and she suddenly leaned forward and whispered:

"Uncle Benjamin, you have done this!"

What she meant she did not exactly know, except that she believed something was being kept back from her, but the importer took it in the worst way it could be construed.

Alarmed beyond endurance, he leaped to his feet and almost shrieked:

"It is a lie!—a lie!"

He swung his arms in air, and looked not unlike a madman.

"A lie, a lie!" he added, wildly.

"Upon my word, I believe it's true," asserted Amerson.

He had been impressed by the signs of guilt. He was not blinded by any faith in Benjamin, and he felt that the face did not tell any falsehood. It spoke in a language of its own, and he believed it told of things which would not bear the light of day. Ionice was confused by the fact that she had always believed in her uncle, but, to Amerson, the importer's face looked like that of a criminal.

"It is false!" again cried Benjamin, excitedly.

"Then your looks and actions belie you," persisted Amerson. "Why do you get so rent by emotion? What have you done to your brother?"

Benjamin Tereston was not a fool, and, as it began to dawn upon him that he had done the worst possible thing in losing control of himself, he made an effort to rally, and succeeded in a measure. Getting his nerves under subjection, he was wise enough to seek to shift the seat of suspicion.

"I should like to know who you are that comes here and accuses me in my own house," he retorted. "Ay, and who are you that puts his alleged knowledge against the word of all who were on the Polly Ann? Either they all lie, or you do."

"I can prove to you who I am!" declared Amerson, warmly. "Fortunately I am as well known as most New Yorkers, and my reputation is safe. Can you say as much?"

"I am not going to discuss such a question in my own house, and I will hear no more from you. Do you see the door?"

"I do."

"Go!"

"I am ordered out, am I?"

"You are!"

"I will go, but you will not dispose of this matter as easily as you do of me. Miss Tereston, rely on me to aid you solve your father's fate. Yes, and lose no time in seeking to solve it."

CHAPTER XXX.

ASHER'S NIGHT.

THE speaker hurriedly wrote on a card and passed it over to Ionice.

"Here is my name and address," he added. "Whenever you wish to see me I am at your service. I will help you to learn who has done violence to Edmund Tereston."

Fixing a keen and accusing gaze upon Benjamin, the caller walked backward out of the room. Nobody tried to delay or address him, and in this striking manner he went from their presence. Presently the outer door closed, and then uncle and niece were alone.

Ionice still held the card, but her mind was only on Benjamin Tereston. So, too, were her eyes fixed on him. They were fixed with a gaze at once troubled, uncertain, accusing and imploring, so much was mingled in the look.

For a moment he was inclined to break

down under the regard, but he rallied somewhat and spoke. He tried to be frank and convincing, but the attempt was too much for him, and his manner was dogged and unpleasant.

"Child," he said, "has this upset you?"

"How could it be otherwise?" was her answer.

"You should not give it a thought."

"Why do you want to shut off investigation in regard to my father?"

"I do not."

"Then why take the course you do?"

"What course?"

"You refuse to believe he is in trouble when all others can see it so plainly."

"I suppose 'all others' means this person who has just called. Do you really give heed to him? Why, the man must be crazy! Yes, yes; that is it. He is deranged. That's just the fact of the case," added Benjamin, pleased with his own idea. "He surely is not right mentally."

"It will be easy to prove whether that is so."

The importer's face fell. Now, his theory did not look so brilliant to him. Investigation would doubtless prove his assertion false, and he would be deeper in the mire than ever.

"Why, I wouldn't believe that man under oath!" he declared. "Can we assume that all those who were on board the Polly Ann have lied about it? Well, I should say not. Pshaw! there is nothing in this wild yarn."

"Still seeking to ward off efforts to solve the mystery!" murmured Ionice.

"Child!"

"Well?"

"How can you be so unjust?"

"How can I longer be blind?"

"What do you think, anyhow?" demanded Benjamin, suddenly relapsing into sullenness.

"I want you to learn what has become of my father."

It was more than he could hope for, and Benjamin caught at the idea eagerly.

"It shall be done, my dear. I'll have a first-class detective, and have him sift the matter to the bottom. This shall all be cleared up. Just rest easy, Ionice, and there shall be a thorough sifting of the grain. I'll get the detective and he shall get to work. Of course you and I will lie back and do nothing, for it would embarrass his own movements. Eh?"

The importer was sorry he made the last suggestion as soon as it was made, but he breathed freer when he failed to see any signs that he had hurt his own cause. Really, he had hurt it seriously, for this effort to make her sit passive while he conducted an investigation just as he saw fit was enough to finish her faint remnants of faith in him.

She rallied to the situation, and, feeling that it was a time when diplomacy was needed, hesitated duly and then answered:

"Can you get a good detective?"

"I can."

"Then that may be the best way."

"It surely is."

"Then let it be done."

"It shall. I will see the man to-morrow."

"Enough, then! Now we will drop the subject, for it is literally wearing me out. I am glad that I have a call to make, for I am so nervous that I can't remain quiet."

Benjamin saw nothing in this finish to alarm him, and he did not comment on it. He thought he was more than willing she should make a call.

Dinner was eaten, and then Ionice left the house. She did have a call to make, but it was one hurriedly planned, and not, as her uncle had inferred, on any of her female friends.

Regarding the latest news as being of the most important kind she believed that she ought to see Steve Starr at once, and it was this which took her from her home.

She might have had the use of the carriage but she would not risk it, thinking it might arouse Benjamin's suspicions, so she decided to depend on public cars.

Securing one as soon as she could she rode until near the detective's main office. Then she was compelled to walk for a short distance—something which soon proved to be a matter of concern to her, for the vicinity was not one productive of quiet confidence.

Rough-looking men stood around the corners, and her heart beat quicker as she hurried along. She was stared at by many, but for a time nothing occurred out of the common run. Then she had a scare.

"Excuse me!"

It was a voice at her elbow, but she did not turn.

"Excuse me, Miss Tereston!"

The sound of her name seemed to put matters on a different footing, and she looked to see who had addressed her. It was a man with a familiar face, but she could not place him immediately.

"Don't you remember me?" he inquired, politely.

"No, sir," she answered, still hurrying on.

"I saw you on the Rose Addison, you know; and my name is Asher Windham," he explained. "Pardon me; you do not seem willing to talk. Hear me for a moment! I do not want to take your time when you may have something else to do, but I can give you news of your father!"

It was the one call which would influence her, and she turned more fully toward him.

"What do you know of him?" she asked, quickly.

"More than you do, I believe."

"Tell me what it is!"

"Not now, Miss Tereston, for it would be a long story, but if you will allow me to call on you to-morrow I shall be glad to tell all I know, and that is not a small matter."

"Where is he?"

Asher shook his head.

"I can't tell you now."

"Is he alive?"

"Quietly! Do not ask too much all at once. Give me time and place, and it shall be told fully. You will hear of things decidedly surprising in their way, and it will be worth your while. Shall I come at ten o'clock to-morrow?"

"Tell me now!" cried Ionice, eagerly.

Asher wanted to go to the girl's house, and to make his aid as telling as possible, so he would not under any condition agree to a plan other than that he had outlined. To carry his point he resorted to a fiction.

"My time is not my own. I have an engagement, and it must be kept without fail. To-morrow, at ten, I will see you, if I may do so."

Ionice saw how useless it would be to talk, so she reluctantly acquiesced in the plan. One thing she was not willing to grant, however: she could not go without assurance that her father was safe.

She asked the question. Now, Asher did not know how that matter was then, and he resorted to diplomacy in his reply.

"I do not know of anything to the contrary, but that's something to be learned later. I can give you information of greatest value, but it will lead to the solution of the mystery, rather than solve it, directly."

It was all she could learn, and, presently, she was compelled reluctantly to see him go. While they moved in opposite directions he chuckled merrily.

"I think I see hope of winning her love—divine creature!—but be that as it may, I will be revenged on Blanche. I'll make a clean breast of it all, whether I win a thing out of it or not. Revenged I will be! Aha! you thought it pastime to throw the drunken fool out of your room, Blanche, but did unwisely. Now you shall feel my claws. This is my night, and it's a light one. A light, sunny night!—the forerunner of triumph. A light night!"

Coming down the street after the adventurer was a carriage with a single occupant—a woman. Her gaze was on Asher, and she was closing up the gap as fast as she could with safety. The street was one little used at that hour, and she had no spies to take notice of her.

Perhaps it was as well; they might have seen that her manner was excited almost to the degree of wildness.

The woman was Lady Blanche.

Still further she closed the gap until the carriage rolled almost beside the adventurer. Wrapped in his own thoughts he did not even hear the vehicle, and his head was not turned.

Suddenly Blanche thrust one hand into her pocket. It came out holding a revolver. She was skilled in the use of the weapon,

and she did not have any doubt of her ability to accomplish the work she had on hand. Grasping the revolver tightly she leaned forward and presented it as close as she could to the pedestrian.

She pulled the trigger.

The report followed.

Asher fell and lay motionless.

Then the full realization of what she had done flashed upon the woman. Terror seized upon her. What if she should be seen and captured?

She gave the horse a blow with the whip and it sprung away. Quickly she was whirled out of sight, but on the sidewalk the victim of her skill lay still and silent.

It was Asher's night, and it was a dark one!

CHAPTER XXXI.

PARTNER BROCKWAY.

IONICE reached Steve's quarters without further adventure, and she had the good fortune to find him in. His first look at her told of the things of interest to come, and when he greeted her and placed a chair for her he waited patiently for her to begin.

"There was no delay.

"I have important news!" she exclaimed.

"I shall be glad to hear it."

"News of my father."

"Is it favorable?"

"That is for you to judge."

Quickly she told of the visit of Morris Amerson to her uncle's house, and of the remarkable revelations he had made. It was dramatically told, yet so clearly, withal, that she was not interrupted as she talked. When all was done she looked eagerly at the silent listener.

"What do you think of it?" she asked.

"As you have said, it is important."

"It proves that my father did sail on the Polly Ann."

"I think not!"

"What?"

"I do not think he did."

"But, Mr. Amerson said so—at least, he saw him on board."

Ionice had lost her eager air, and seemed on the point of weeping, for she had expected Starr to agree with her.

"No doubt Amerson was sincere," replied Steve, "but I believe he was deceived."

"Not by father?"

"I think *he* was deceived, too."

"How could he be?"

"That is a mystery to me."

"I don't understand you in the least, but didn't father know his own vessel? Wasn't he on board the Polly Ann?"

"Miss Tereston, the first time I saw you I asked if your father's firm owned more than one vessel. Now, I have next to positive proof that they did, though very secretly. Perhaps I should not have said 'your father's firm,' for the second vessel was purchased after, as you have told me, he ceased to be a real member. But what was left of the firm did have such a vessel, and I believe it was not on the Polly Ann, but on the second craft, which was called the Red Rover, that he embarked. In some way he was deceived as to the identity of the barks, and doubtless he supposed himself on the Polly Ann, just as all reports say he was."

"Then what has become of him?"

"I think he reached New York."

"And then?"

"Miss Tereston," gravely replied the detective, "we may as well set Benjamin Tereston down as a villain. All things go to show that he was your father's enemy, and that he has put him out of sight—"

"How?" sharply interrupted Ionice.

"I know not."

"Has he—has he—killed him?"

Breathed, rather than spoke was the question, and her manner went straight to the detective's heart. He felt for her keenly.

"As long as we have no proof that harm has come to him, let us hope for the best."

It was an evasive reply, for, if Steve had spoken as he believed, he would then and there have admitted that Edmund Tereston was probably dead, but this he could not bring himself to do. If she must confront the dread fact at all, the time of certainty was soon enough to meet it.

"What can have been the motive for doing him harm, even by keeping him out of sight?" added Ionice.

"Yes, why?"

Mechanically Steve asked the question. To himself he added: Why had Benjamin been Edmund's enemy, and why had the Polly Ann been sunk? He believed he had the answer to these questions, for time had given him a clear theory, but there was still much that was hazy about the theory and it must be seen to further.

Ionice had more to say on the subject, and she sought eagerly to get light from her ally, but as he had none to give he handled the subject with what diplomacy he could and let it go at that.

Then she suddenly remembered Asher Windham and told of her singular interview with him.

This interested the detective more. He did not know exactly what position Asher occupied in the case, but he was not surprised to hear that the adventurer had something to say after his experience with the Armstrongs. That he would tell all he could seemed likely, and Steve caught at the suggestion.

"Can you arrange it so I can overhear the conversation?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then let it be so."

"It shall. He is to call at ten o'clock of the forenoon. Do you come before that hour, and I will secrete you so you can hear everything we say."

"Yes, and then, if I do not think Asher is telling what he might, I can step out and put the screws onto him."

The girl's call was not prolonged any further than seemed necessary, and when she left, Steve saw her safely to a car on a respectable and safe street.

The next day the detective did not forget his appointment, and he was at the house as soon as Benjamin Tereston went out. Ionice secreted him as had been arranged, and then they waited for Asher Windham. It was a vain wait, for the adventurer did not come. Ten o'clock arrived, and so did eleven, but Asher came not.

Steve did not entirely give up until it was twelve, and then the fact had to be faced that the man was not coming.

Disappointed thus, it became a question as to what it was best for them to do. The detective thought of taking Ionice to the hotel where the adventurer was stopping, but there was the danger of scaring him off, and the plan was abandoned.

Instead, Steve went there alone.

He did not see Asher, so he resorted to an expedient. Going out he visited a telegraph office and wrote a note of no importance, and sent it over by messenger. He had not dared to ask if Asher was in, himself, but this would give the clue, and he gave orders to have the note delivered only to Windham, and that it was to be returned if he was not there.

The messenger came back with the note, and with the information, gained from the hotel clerk, that Windham had not been there since lunch of the previous day.

Securing the note Steve went his way.

"A broken promise. Has Asher been scared off, or has he made up with Lady Blanche, or— Really, it would not surprise me if that female tiger had done him harm."

The random guess was closer than the detective knew.

Still anxious on the point, and not willing to let any chance slip, he paid another secret visit to the vacant flat next to Lady Blanche's, but the latter was untenanted, and though he waited for some time he did not see her or anybody else.

Once more, too, he went to Tereston's, but Asher had not come.

The disappointment was weighing heavily on the girl's spirits, and Steve delayed to try to cheer her up a little. They were standing by the window when he chanced to look out and a surprising discovery followed.

Ansel Armstrong was passing the house.

The detective said nothing, but drew a little back. Suddenly Ionice broke the silence.

"Do you know my uncle's partner, Rand Brockway?" she asked.

"No."

"That is he, passing."

"Which one?"

"The man with the black suit and the high hat."

It was he who was known to Steve as Ansel Armstrong.

It was no surprise, for the detective had suspected it before, but it was a fact of interest. More than ever he could see the evil influence that Blanche had exercised throughout the case.

"I have never heard much of Mr. Brockway," he quietly returned. "What is he? Where does he live?"

"In a boarding-house somewhere. He is unmarried."

"Ah!"

"He is reputed to be a man of almost hermit-like life, and that is about all I know of him."

Steve could not repress a smile. The "hermit" was like a good many other men of the sort in New York, and his double life was as radical in its extremes as that of hypocrites usually were. While he was posing as a bachelor in one sphere of life he was living with a wife he dared not bring into public view.

Steve suspected that the man's downfall was all due to his infatuation for Blanche.

The afternoon was fast drawing to a close, and the detective left the house, confident that, whatever was the explanation of Asher's non-arrival, he would not appear until another day, at least.

For some time Steve had not seen Hick Peters, so, after supper, he set out to see if the sailor was to be found. Recent events had caused him to be more than usually on the alert, and on this occasion he was rewarded for sharp watching by catching sight of a man who was dogging him with careful attention.

It was Mike, the stevedore.

"Persistent shadow!" muttered the detective. "I am about tired of this sort of thing. He is too sociable by far. I am tempted to have him arrested. He is liable to do me some harm when I am off my guard."

Not caring to have the spy on his track, Steve used the old artifice of entering a store by one door and leaving it by another, thus freeing himself from espionage, but when he saw Mike give the effort up a new idea came to the officer.

"Suppose I turn the tables on him? I have not been very attentive to Mike, but he may be worth it. He has made himself very active in the way of trying to do me mischief. I'll dog him to his lair, and then I can arrest him if I see fit."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A REMARKABLE FIND.

MIKE did not seem for an instant to think he would be followed, himself, and he presented no obstacles to the successful accomplishment of the detective's scheme. Steve-dore Steve pursued quietly until he saw Mike enter an old house.

"Hived, at last!" murmured the officer. "What next? I have half a mind to take him in at once. It would stow his efforts to do away with me, and he might possibly be made to confess. I'll do it."

So the detective went to the nearest station-house for assistance, and was soon on his way back. They were proceeding thus when Steve was suddenly called by name.

He looked and saw Hick Peters.

"How is biz?" inquired the sailor.

"Nothing especially new with me. How is it with you?"

"I'm goin' ter ship again."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"You look melancholy over it."

"So I be. I'd like ter stay until they find Ben Bipps's body—"

"What if he should prove to be alive?"

"Ben Bipps is dead!" asserted Hick, dismally. "He wouldn't never stay away thus from his messmate, an' you kin set it down as a fact that he has sailed his last voyage. A rare messmate was Ben Bipps, an' the angel who sets up aloft ter look out fer all Jack Tars has took him by the hand afore now an' anchored him in the best corner o' the harbor!"

"You seem to think his good luck a hardship."

"'Tis fer me, an' I ruther guess Ben would prefer ter be right here on the earth, ruther than bein' in the final port."

"You've given him up an' are going to ship, eh?"

"Yes. Say, what is up, Steve? Kin I have any fun ter drive the kinks out o' my noddle an' set the stagnant blood ter boom-in'?"

The detective saw that the Hick was ripe for a disturbance, so he explained what they were about to do. The sailor grew much brighter of face and struck Steve a heavy blow on the shoulder.

"Count me in, lad! I don't know of anything I'd ruther do afore sailin' than ter git a crack at Mike. Arrest him ef you wish, but let me swipe him once fer luck afore you do et!"

"You may have the chance. Anyhow, come along."

They went, and were soon at the house to which Mike had been tracked. They were expecting trouble, but the woman who opened the door evidently was not the one to make it; she seemed about scared out of her wits when she saw the visitors.

"Mike?" she repeated. "Yes; there is such a man here."

"We want him."

"I'll call him—"

"No! Where is he?"

"In his room."

"Lead us there, at once."

"I shall be afraid of him when you are gone."

"You will not, for he will go with us."

"But—"

"Lead on!" ordered Steve, peremptorily.

She could delay no further and the command was obeyed, though her face still bore the frightened look. To a room on the third floor they were conducted, and then she indicated a certain door.

"In there!" she whispered, "but don't you blame me for anything, for I have been too much afraid of him to say a word—"

"Be at your ease; it is not you we want."

Steve tried the door. It was locked, but he did not let that delay him. Setting his shoulder against it he pushed hard and the door flew open. They entered.

All was dark there, but a sharp cry at once proved that the place had a tenant.

"Ho! Who in thunder is there? What do you mean—"

A giant figure was coming toward them, and Hick exclaimed:

"That's Mike!"

"At him!"

Steve was not sure what they might have to deal with if they let time go to waste, so he acted with promptness. He sprang upon the big stevedore, and the second officer followed his example with zeal. Unluckily for Hick he had been too far in the rear to get a part in the attack, but he remembered his desire to "swipe" the tough, and he was now guilty of the unsportsman-like act of reaching out and hitting Mike a resounding thump between the hands of the officers.

"Jest fer luck!" he remarked, apologetically.

Perhaps the charm worked well, for, after a fight which was hot while it lasted, Mike was subdued and handcuffed.

"A tough customer!" declared the second officer, panting from his exertions.

Mike expressed his own sentiments in language more emphatic than classic. He took the downfall hard, and was still full of fight, but his helpless hands furnished a good reason why he did no more than to talk.

"Strike a light," suggested the man from the police-station.

"I was looking for a match," replied Steve. "Ah! I have it."

The gas flamed up, and the trio of invaders looked around curiously.

"Great old den!" commented Hick.

The term was well applied. The room was almost filled with boxes, barrels and other obstructions, and the litter made it hard to see all at once.

"Hullo!" cried Hick, suddenly. "See the bed heave!"

"Full of bed-bugs, I reckon," returned the officer.

"Mighty lively ones, then!"

Steve's own gaze was on the quarter of upheaval, and he could not help arriving at

a conclusion. Covers hid the thing which was moving so lustily, but it was, he believed, either a human being or an animal.

Quickly moving forward, he lay hold of the covers and pulled them off with a jerk. Then he saw what had done it all.

It was a man!

There he lay, but he had ceased his struggles and was gazing up into Steve's face. That he did no more was not strange, for he was both gagged and bound, the ropes that held him being passed around the bedstead several times.

The detective's first thought was that he was as rough-looking a person as even Mike, and so he was in one sense, for his face was red, broad, coarse and as much seamed and scarred as if he had been in numerous powder explosions; but, when these facts were left out of consideration, it was to be seen that he had a very different expression in general.

Hick had pressed forward to see what was there, too, and Steve was suddenly startled by a roar as if the sailor was shouting to the man in the moon.

Then Hick fell to dancing madly.

"Have you lost your senses?" demanded Steve, sharply.

"Ho! Hip! Yah! Whoo!" yelled Hick, wildly.

"What do you mean?"

"Yah! Whir-r-r! Yoop!"

The detective lay hold of the prancing man and shook him lustily.

"Are you crazy?" he cried.

"Ki! Whoo!—"

"Stop, you idiot!"

"But et's him!"

"Who?"

"Him!"

"See here, if you don't stop your crazy antics, I'll fire you out of this room! Have you taken leave of what little sense you had? Let me hear any more of it, and out you go. I won't have it!"

"But," shouted Hick, "it's him, I say!"

"Who?"

"Ben Bipps!"

And with that Hick fell upon the bound man and hugged him with zeal, all the while uttering his discordant cries, while from the bound man came muffled tones quite as expressive, even if guttural.

Steve was astonished, as well as incredulous, but he saw a way to decide the question then and there. Drawing his pocket-knife he severed the prisoner's bonds, after which the latter leaped nimbly to his feet.

"Now," said the detective, "let me know what this means at—"

But the two men roared together like lions, and then fell to hugging each other as if they were enfolding the sweetest bit of humanity in the world, and while they embraced they waltzed wildly around the room.

Such a scene the detective had never seen before.

He gave no further heed to his attempt to get an explanation. It was clear that the only way was to wait, and as there was a limit to their endurance he would have his reward some time.

But one thing seemed sure—Ben Bipps was really found.

When the sailors had satisfied their transport in a measure they fell to shaking hands, and then Steve thought it time to interfere.

"Come, Hick, you are not a boy, if you do act more childish than one. Get your wits back and tell me what all this means. And you, sir—are you really Ben Bipps?"

"Ben Bipps I be," replied the released prisoner, "late o' the bark Red Rover, an' now o' this Bastyle. Hang et all! I've been held here like a mutineer, but my turn has come. Shoot me ef I don't fix this land-shark!" and he moved menacingly toward Mike.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE OLD SALT'S STORY.

THE detective prevented the hostile purpose.

"Judging from appearances you have good cause to hold spite against this ruffian," he observed, "but he is now a prisoner and

must be so regarded. Whatever may be the extent of his evil doing, the law stands ready to punish him."

"So do I!" declared Ben Bipps.

"The law will pay off the score."

"I could do et a good deal quicker," hungrily asserted Ben Bipps.

"Let him be. Why has he held you prisoner, though? That is something I don't understand."

"Et'll take a good long while ter tell the yarn, but I'm jest hankerin' ter spin et. Hick, lad, I've been through a pile o' things sence you give me that chaw o' terbarker on board the old Red Rover."

"Defer the story a little," suggested Steve. "Let us take this prisoner away, and get ourselves into condition to talk before we try to do so. It may pay us to go slow."

The detective tried to be calm, but the connection of the name of Ben Bipps with the recent events suggested the possibility that he might say something of the keenest interest, and even Steve's pulse was quickened.

Mike was taken to the police station and lodged in a cell. He had relapsed into sullen silence, but the gleam of his barbarian eyes told that he was unsubdued mentally, and none of the party cared to keep him near them. This done, Steve took the sailors to his own room at the hotel. Ben Bipps complained of a raging thirst, and the circumstances were such that the detective thought he was justified in letting him say what would best wipe it out. Ben Bipps said, and though it was strong drink, he got it. His sea training was to be seen in the way he disposed of it.

Early in the case Hick had said that his friend was not handsome or stylish. As Steve sat there and looked at the scarred old fellow, with the form and face of a gnarled tree, he thought the description well applied, for a homelier man than Ben Bipps it would have been hard to find.

He was a hero, just then, however, and he was admired by Hick as if he were a jewel.

The detective tried to be patient, but Ben was too full of a desire to talk to let much time go to waste. Abruptly turning upon his old friend he exclaimed:

"Messmate, I've been dead sence I see you last!"

"I thought so."

"Dead, buried, resurrected, maltreated, kept in the 'brig,' an' generally knocked galley west an' inter mush."

"Tell us all about it, Ben."

"Where's the Red Rover?"

"Right where she was."

"Any row there?"

"I ain't seen any."

"Mr. Bipps, did you see any row?" asked Steve, suddenly.

"Wal, now you bet I did, an' that's what knocked me out. Why, et was worse than any harrycane I ever sailed through."

Ben Bipps was anxious to talk, but it needed a good deal of craft to get him under way. When, however, enough of the grog had gone down his ox-like neck he got under way.

"Wal, Hick, you know how you gave me that chaw o' terbarker, that night. That chaw was still in my mouth when these things occurred that I am about ter relate."

"I was setting up after you turned in when a carriage drove down on the pier, an' a man an' a woman got out an' come on board. Mebbe you didn't know et, but another man had come some time afore. The new ones went inter the cabin, an' all had a sociable, I reckon, by what follered."

"You know how things was, that night, Hick—the Old Man had set up the drink grog so plentiful that all but me was pooty drunk. I reckon et was so with you."

"Ben, ef you think a bit you'll remember I had shore leave, an' I went right after you got the terbarker," put in Hick.

"Then mebbe it was me who was some mixed in my reckonin' from too much grog, but I got sobered," admitted Ben Bipps.

"Yes, I was a bit boozy, an' that was why I was out o' my latitude on the bark, an' why I got closer ter the cabin than I need be."

"Ye see, I heard voices loud an' quick there, an' I jest made up my mind, for the fun o' the thing, ter see who was quarrelin'."

Wal, I did get a pile o' fun out o' it, by gosh!

"Yes, I spied on them. I seen them all in a talkin' bee. There was the Old Man—"

"Meaning Captain Thomes?" asked Steve.

"Ay, ay, lad; who else? There was him, an' a young woman, an' a youngish man, an' two old, gray-headed men who was dressed up in great shape. It was them who was havin' the scrap."

"Did you hear any names?" inquired the detective, quickly.

"They called the young woman Blanche, an' the young man called Breakaway, or something 'like it—"

"Brockway?"

"That was it."

"And the two old men?"

"One called the other Benjamin, an' t'other called him Edmund."

Steve drew a deep breath. Here was a measure of proof, at last.

"And their quarrel?" added Steve.

"What was that about?"

"That I couldn't ketch onter, only that there was somethin' Ben had done, an' he wanted Edmund ter keep quiet about it. Edmund kept sayin' he would not be quiet, an' wouldn't be party ter no sech villainy, as he called et, an' they did have et hot. All the others, includin' the old man, was with Ben, while Edmund had ter fight his battle alone."

"Along with their other words I made out somethin' which kinder surprised me. The man they called Edmund had come all the way from Calcutta on the bark, an' had been shut up in one o' the state-rooms. Yes, come all the way with us."

"He accused the Old Man o' givin' him some drug ter make him sick, an' he was hot over et, still. Seems Thomes made him believe fer a long time he had some contagious disease, an' that the crew would mutiny against havin' the disease on board, an' throw him over, ef they got onter et; so Edmund come all the way in the state-room on the sly, an' only the Old Man knew he was on the bark."

"Wal, as I said, they kept up the quarrel fer a long time, but Edmund he got tired of et, an' he said he would speak no more; an' he made a break fer the Old Man's cabin ter get away."

"Then what does the woman do but say they must nab him, an' the whole gang set onter him an' a right smart tussle began in the Old Man's cabin."

"That was too much fer me, fer I was loaded with grog an' sorter reckless, an' I rushed in an' went fer them like sin. Doubtlin' my fists I sailed in ter help Edmund, an' I did jest everlastin'ly knock them around fer awhile."

"But what could I do with so many, when I had the grog ter carry?"

"They piled on me like dogs onter a deer, an' I got taken off my course. Still, I held to until the woman hit me with a belayin'-pin—I know she did et, fer I see et over my head in her grasp, but that was all I did know."

"The pin fell, an' I lost all run o' things fer awhile."

"The next I knowed I was rollin' about in the water, wet ez you please, an' completely rattled. When I had consulted the chart, an' other things, I found I was hangin' ter the side o' the pier by a nail, or spike, or some sech thing, an' jest like a shirt hung out fer wash."

"I see then, an' I kin see now, that they had knocked me insensible and flung me in-ter the dock, but I ketched on as I said, an' there I hung. Et was all that kept me from drownin'."

"I was rollin' bad an' my decks was all awash, so I set out ter git up on the pier. This I did after some difficulty, an' I was jest shakin' myself like a dog when, lo! I was pounced on by three men. At the time I didn't know who they was, but et was Mike an' two others."

"I tried ter fight, but I was so played out that I didn't make much of a show, an' the measly pirates jest set on me an' did me up. I was put in a cab an' took ter Mike's den, an' there I hev stayed ever sence, tied up an' gagged."

"Now an' then I was given a chance ter talk, ter see ef I would weaken, but I wouldn't, so there I was, ye sec. Then you

come an' rescued of me, an' the jig was up." Ben Bipps ceased, took another pull at the grog, and then put out his hand to Hick with the brief request:

"Terbarker!"

He received it.

"But," exclaimed Steve, "why did Mike want you for a prisoner, anyhow?"

"Et was like this," explained Ben Bipps. "Et seems that the three stevedores got onter a part o' the game, an' was hired by the plotters ter keep mum; but Mike was of a soarin' disposition, an' he wanted ter know et all, so he could fill his pockets—play blackmailer. See? So, knowin' I had been chucked in-ter the drink by them, he wanted me ter tell him all, so he could work his rifle. That's why he took me at the first, an' why he kept me."

"Yes," added Hick, "an' I kin see that he tried ter down me jest 'cause he knowed I was Ben Bipps's chum, an' that you was on his books because you was my associate. Puffectly clear!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE TWO BARKS.

STEVE STARR leaned back in his chair and meditated on the latest developments. Things were going merrily, at length, and he could see a long ways into the mystery. There could no longer be a shadow of doubt that Edmund Tereston had reached New York, and it was equally clear that he owed all his troubles to his brother and the latter's allies.

It only remained to knit the loose ends of the fabric into the general web.

Hick and Ben Bipps had a chance to talk somewhat before Steve resumed with the inquiry:

"Do you know what became of the man you heard called Edmund?"

"No," responded Ben Bipps.

"Didn't Mike mention him?"

"Yes, but he didn't know, himself. He wanted ter find out, so he could play black-mailer, but, whatever had become o' Edmund, et was done so that Mike knew nothin' about et."

"Don't you even know if he lived?"

"No."

"Did you see anything to indicate that they were in a mood to do him harm?"

"Wal, they was feelin' pritty rusty, but I dunno."

"Now, men, one thing more. You two sailed more than one voyage on the Red Rover, did you?"

"Ay, ay, lad!"

Steve leaned forward and, in a deep tone, added:

"Are you sure you made the last voyage on the Red Rover?"

"Eh?"

"Are you positive you came from Calcutta on that craft, and that it was the Red Rover that lay in the dock when you had these experiences?"

"Why, what in thunder be you givin' us?" demanded Hick.

"Answer me, if you please."

"Wal, a feller generally knows his own ship, b'gosh!"

"You say you were constantly on board, do you?"

"Not jest that. When the Red Rover touched at New York the last voyage afore this, Ben Bipps an' me took our kits onter the Speedy Wing, schooner, Captain Marks, bound fer Calcutta, 'cause they were short o' hands and offered good pay; an' we s'posed we was done with the Red Rover, but old Marks was a tyrant an' we deserted in Calcutta. Then, a bit after, what should we hear but that the Red Rover was again in Calcutta an' lookin' fer men, so we shipped on her again an' come home. So you see we missed jest one-half of a voyage."

"How did the Red Rover happen to be short of men on this occasion?"

"She fired the whole crew, because Thomes said they was no good."

"He got a new crew, eh?"

"All but Ben Bipps an' me."

"Did he seem willing to take you two back?"

"He didn't know he had us until we was out ter sea. Et was a regular party in Calcutta that shipped us, d'ye see, so Thomes only see us when we got off from shore."

"Did you find everything familiar on the Red Rover? Was there no change whatever?"

"Why, yes; there had been some carpenter work done inside, an' a free supply o' paint laid on below, so she *had* changed a bit."

"But it was the same old ship?"

"Say, messmate, what be you givin' us?" demanded Hick, wonderingly. "Didn't we know the Red Rover?"

"Hick, you and Cuppy both told me that the Red Rover and the Polly Ann were built by the same parties—so did ex-Captain Rush, and I think he said they were Bristol built, and of the same pattern. Now, what did that mean? Of the same pattern. Men, *how much alike* were the two barks?"

"As much alike as two twins!" cried Ben Bipps.

"Ay, ay," added Hick. "They were turned off at the same time from the yard, I've heard say, and was as much alike as two peas."

"Are you dead sure that when you last shipped in Calcutta you took passage on the Red Rover, or was it the Polly Ann?"

The suspicion which Steve had entertained for some days had breath at last, but, as was to be expected, it did not find credence with the sailors. Alike or not alike, they were not willing to admit that they could have gone on board the double and mistaken her for the Red Rover, after they had sailed so long on the latter.

It did seem next to impossible, but, though they warmly refused to admit that the detective's theory could by any possibility be correct, he did not waver. He had studied out the idea slowly and carefully, and to acknowledge a mistake would be to throw the whole Tereston case into chaos again.

And he believed he knew the full mystery of the two barks, and why the missing one had been scuttled in mid-ocean.

When the sailors had been pumped dry the detective left them and went out alone. He saw that his case was drawing to a close, and it only remained to wind it up decisively. With the information already at hand he felt that he could afford to make charges against the conspirators, but he wished to get a little more evidence, if possible.

While he believed he knew just why one of the twin barks had been scuttled at sea he desired chance to experiment on his idea.

As for Edmund Tereston, he was not prepared to say what had been his fate. Benjamin Tereston had talked of a "crime" they had committed, and said it might yet bring them to the gallows, but as they undoubtedly supposed that Ben Bipps was dead when he was thrown into the dock, it seemed likely that it was that event which was referred to, though the missing ex merchant might have shared the same fate.

He hoped that Edmund still lived.

Yet, it would not do to rely upon it.

Straight to the house where Pardon Gallup was caring for Captain Hawk went the detective. He met the sandwich man, and studied his face eagerly.

"What news?"

"Nawthin', podner," replied Pardon.

"How is Hawk?"

"Tame as ever."

"Still out of his head?"

"Sure, Mike!"

Steve was disappointed, but he took it as coolly as possible.

"I will see him."

They went to the mariner. Hawk was having a hard time with his injured head. He was under the influence of drugs, and the doctor had said he was doing as well as possible. He was not exactly delirious, and did not act violently, but his mind wandered constantly when he was awake.

Steve addressed him.

"Well, captain, how are you?"

"Like an old wreck, cast up on shore to blister in the sun and be of no use to anybody," replied Hawk, lugubriously.

"You will soon be all right."

"I am on my way to Davy Jones's locker."

"Nonsense! You will come out all right. Cheer up! Get your mind off from your hurt. Tell me all about your last voyage, to pass time."

Steve was not a little surprised to see the result of his suggestion. The captain burst into tears.

"Would to heaven I had never gone on that voyage!" he cried. "Ay, ay, it would have been better for my soul!"

The detective believed that remorse was the next best thing to having lived an upright life, but he was well aware that this remorse was superficial and unnatural. It was simply the result of the mental condition of the sick man.

"Have you done anything so very bad?" he asked, insinuatingly.

"I scuttled the bark!" groaned Hawk.

"Why did you do it?"

"That was my orders."

"From whom?"

"The owners."

"Tereston Brothers & Brockway?"

"Brockway gave me the directions."

"Why was it done?"

"That was their business!" retorted Hawk, with sudden suspicion.

"Was the cargo lost?"

"That was my business!" loudly proclaimed the mariner, and his eyes began to grow wild.

"Did Edmund Tereston try to sail from Calcutta with you?"

"See here!" cried Hawk, "if you catechise me any more I will lay your head open with a belaying-pin! Do you see? I'll have no more of it—no; not a thing. Drop it, now, or out goes your lights. Hang it! I'll wring your neck!—that's what I will!"

The weeping mood was all gone, and Steve saw that his presence so irritated the patient that it was prudent to leave him alone. He called the sandwich man out of the room.

"Pardon, you want to watch sharply here," he advised.

"Sure, Mikel!"

"See to it that no foe enters to do Hawk damage."

"I will."

"If you see suspicious signs, send for me immediately."

"Never fear. I've left the sandwich biz an' blossomed out as a detective. Yes, an' I'll do my duty well. Sure, Mikel!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE DETECTIVE SPY.

STEVE went home. That night he slept soundly, and took no pains to rise early the next morning. When up, he had his breakfast in as calm and leisurely fashion as if he had not the least thing of importance on his mind.

Afterward he went out and began an undertaking which occupied him for several hours. When it was done he started for home, and he went with the thought in his mind:

"I feel surer than ever that I know why the bark was scuttled."

The fact did not occur to him that his course was past the fruit stand presided over by Carma Petresso, but he was brought to the realization of this fact by a voice which called his name.

He looked and saw Carma.

"I wanted to see you," she announced.

"Why?"

"My father is goin' ter leave New York."

"He is? Why?"

"He's got scared because he helped Mike lure you in that night, an' he's goin' ter skip an' go ter New Orleans."

"What will become of you?"

"He says I'm ter go, too, but I don't want ter."

Steve looked critically at the girl. He had seen that she was by far too good to be with Trezzo Petresso, and exposed to the temptations of the life he would cause her to mix in.

Acting on this thought he asked her if she would remain in New York under his care. It was a striking sight to see her face light up at the idea, and she promptly declared that she would. He told her to let him know before the removal took place, and he would see that she was not called upon to go.

This relieved her mind a good deal, and with the relief came a new recollection.

"I just saw the captain of that ship," she stated; "the Red Rover, you know. They came along."

"They? Who?"

"The captain and another man. They

bought fruit of me, and then stood over there and talked in low tones, as ef they were afraid somebody would hear them, but I did hear. They are going ter have a talk at the other feller's room in a boardin'-house, this afternoon, an' a third man is ter be with them."

All this Carma said carelessly, and at any other time Steve might have seen nothing in it. Just then, however, he was in a mood to catch at trifles.

"Describe the man who was with Thomes," he requested.

Carma did so, and it was a good description of Rand Brockway. This stirred Steve up, and he had more to inquire about. The result was that he learned that three men were to have a meeting at the boarding-house at four o'clock that day.

"Is it a meeting of the conspirators?" he wondered, as he went on. "I am half inclined to see if I can be present in secrecy."

He thought about it until he decided to act. By looking at the Directory he learned where Brockway boarded, and then he went over to that quarter. It was a plain house on a plain street.

While he was watching he saw a servant leave the house on an errand. When he caught sight of her he started, for she was one who had helped him in a previous case of his. He accosted her, was received with friendly good will, and then he asked many questions of her.

Somehow, she did not like Brockway, and he had easy work before him. Replying to his inquiry she said she could easily introduce him to the house, since the landlady was away, and it was the cook's afternoon out. He entered with her to look the scene over.

Where could he secrete himself so he could listen?

It was not hard to see, for among the articles of furniture was an old-fashioned "secretary," and the base was like a box. This part was empty, and examination showed that he could secrete himself there without trouble.

It was already three o'clock, and he decided to wait for events.

Somewhat before four he entered the base and pulled the front-piece into place after him.

He was not disappointed. Presently two men came, and he looked out secretly and saw Rand Brockway and Captain Thomes. Ten minutes later the ringing of the bell was followed by the appearance of Benjamin Tereston.

"Now we are all here," remarked Brockway, "so let us to business at once. Mr. Tereston, will you speak first?"

"I have nothing to say," gloomily replied the importer.

"Why not?"

"I wish I had died before we began this work."

"Nonsense!"

"I wish the bark was again afloat, and that I had never acceded to your scheme."

"So do I," added Thomes.

"Do you both weaken thus?" demanded Brockway, angrily.

"Weaken!" repeated Tereston, bitterly.

"Is it the name you give to remorse?"

"You only feel fear!" sneered Brockway.

"Call it what you will, the plot hatched by the woman who has ruined you, and by you both urged upon me, is likely to bring us all to destruction."

"We will not talk about it," responded Brockway, with a change of tone. "Let us do our business; let us face the situation. I have told you I think a detective is on our track. What are we to do?"

"Flee!" suggested Thomes.

"Not I!"

"Captain Hawk has disappeared," added the other mariner, "and I'm in daily fear that he may confess that we hired him to scuttle the bark."

"Drop that!" exclaimed Brockway. "We did scuttle the bark, and she went down in mid-ocean. That settles that. Drop it! Now, we must see to this detective, if I am right about Starr being on the case; and we must do something about Edmund Tereston. What?"

"Release him," replied Benjamin.

"Never!" cried Brockway.

"Suppose he is found," put in Thomes.

"Wouldn't that lose the last chance of clemency to us?"

"We must take measures to prevent his being found," Brockway explained.

"Gentlemen," urged Benjamin, with shaking voice, "he is my brother!"

"Enough of that!" said Brockway. "From the first you have been a weakling, scared of your own shadow—"

"And why?" demanded Benjamin. "You know as well as I that I would never have agreed to this had I foreseen the shame, sorrow and crime that would come of it. I was weak enough to consent to the scuttling of the bark, but I thought that would end it all. It did not. The unfortunate chance which made my brother enter Calcutta just in time to seek passage on the other bark; the fact that he discovered the original plot; his refusal to let us carry out the work; the tragic scenes which followed—all this made a very different case to that which I was mad enough to place the seal of my approval upon."

"We waste time," sullenly returned Brockway. "The question is, can we remove Edmund to a place where he is less likely to be found?"

"We had better," admitted Thomes.

"Do you promise to do no harm to him?" demanded Benjamin.

"Yes."

"Nor to jeopardize his health in any manner?"

"I promise."

Benjamin dropped his head wearily upon his hands.

"It may be best so."

"Good!" cried Brockway. "Now, I have engaged a yacht, and on this we can take him to the Jersey coast during the night, and hide him more effectually."

"I like that," said Thomes. "And you, Ben Tereston?"

"Do it, if you wish!" sighed Benjamin.

"To-morrow night it shall be done," Brockway continued, with an air of relief.

"At twelve o'clock of the night I will have the yacht off the pier where the bark lies, and the transfer can be quickly made. In the meanwhile I will try to lure the detective into a trap where he can be disposed of. Is there more to say?"

Neither of the lesser conspirators had anything to say, so Brockway rose.

"I don't want to hurry you away," he added, "but I am in this battle for my very life, and I have work to do. Let us adjourn."

The three men moved out of the room. As they did so there was a tremor of the lower part of the secretary, and the base-front was moved aside by some force within.

Stevadore Steve partially emerged from his hiding-place, where he had overheard every word.

The law-breakers receded, but they had left their secrets with the alert detective.

Even in their own home, he had outwitted them and scored a decisive victory.

Keenly the detective watched the plotters depart, still cautious. The only danger was that they would return and discover him.

"Go for now!" muttered Stevadore Steve, "but the law is on your track. Little did you think the very walls had ears here."

They did not return, and in a short time he, too, was outside the house, and the event of the afternoon was over. He was the winner.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CAST-OFF SPEAKS.

STEVE did not hurry about going home, and, as a result, it was dark when he arrived there. He was surprised to hear that a lady was awaiting him in the parlor, but it was less of a surprise, on arriving there, to find that the lady was Ionice Tereston.

She seemed excited, and, rising, spoke quickly:

"I wanted to see you, Mr. Starr."

"Is there anything new?" he returned.

"Read this!"

She extended a note, and he unfolded it and read as follows:

"MISS TERESTON:—I did not keep my engagement with you, but it was through no fault of mine. I desired to tell you of persons who have been, and are, deadly foes of

yours and of those dear to you. All this I should have told at the appointed time, but I was met by one of the foes named and given a bullet wound which has nearly taken my life. I am still helpless, but in condition to talk. If you value your peace of mind, come to the address you will find on the inclosed card, and see me as soon as possible. Delay not!

ASHER WINDHAM."

The writing of this note was weak and uncertain, as Steve quickly discovered, and he looked up with a new light in his eyes.

"What do you think of it?" demanded Ionice.

"I think you had better go."

"It may be a trap."

"Yes, but I do not think so."

"Notice the locality. I dare not go there alone."

"Decidedly not! In any case you should have a protector, and I will see to that. The note says delay not! Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Then let us go."

Steve had no preparations to make. His revolver was in his pocket and ready for use, so he felt able to guard the girl, if trouble came; but that was something he was not looking for. They left the hotel and proceeded toward the place named by Windham.

The house was as humble as the locality, but when they rung the bell the door was opened by a pleasant-faced woman who looked honest.

"Is Asher Windham here?" asked Steve.

"Yes. Is this the young lady he wanted to see?"

"It is."

"Come in, then, for he is getting feverish in his anxiety, and the sooner you see him, the better."

She conducted them to the parlor and then went away for a short time. When she returned it was to bid them follow to the sick man's room. She added that he had seemed greatly pleased to hear of her arrival, and she hoped it would do him good.

"How did he happen to be here?" asked the detective.

"Somebody—he won't tell who—shot him when he was outside our door. We found him before the police did, and when he recovered his senses he begged of us not to call the police."

By this time they were before the door of the room they were seeking, and talk ceased. She pushed the door open and entered. A light was burning, and it revealed a bed which was occupied by a man.

It was Asher Windham, pale of face and demoralized of appearance.

He fixed his gaze eagerly upon Ionice and exclaimed:

"At last!—at last!"

The voice was weak, but it was so apparently sincere that Steve felt sure they had made no mistake in coming.

"Come nearer," added the adventurer.

"It's a goodly sight to behold you, and this is an occasion when a villain can be of service to a decent person. I am glad of it. I'm acting out of revenge, but there is more in it than that. I am really glad I can be of use to one so sweet as you. That is not gallantry, but sincere homage. Enough of idle words, however, for I am weak, and I want to speak right to the point."

He turned his gaze upon Steve.

"I am here as Miss Tereston's friend," remarked the officer.

"A detective is a good friend, usually," dryly answered Asher. "Let us not speak of that, for I am not objecting. Indeed, I am glad to see such an ally here, for it is a guarantee of active work against Miss Tereston's foes. Sit down, all, and let me talk."

They obeyed, and he first took a drink of some kind and then went on in a low but firm voice.

"Some time ago I came to New York from foreign lands, after a long absence. After my arrival I was idly looking at a daily paper when I chanced to notice an advertisement which stated that a certain 'Lady Blanche' would sell tips on the races in the usual way. I was too much a man of the world to care for horse-racing, and had long before abandoned the so-called sports to beardless youths and silly women—a man of blood can find better re-

creation—but the idea of a female giver of 'tips' was new to me and I decided to see her as a novelty.

"I went, and thus my acquaintance with her began. It has proved a costly acquaintance, for she proved treacherous, and has now given me this bullet as a pledge of her lost favor."

"Let me speak of one time when I went to call on her, ostensibly for 'tips.' She was not in when I called, so I waited for her to return."

"After a time, when it had grown late for decent people to be up, I heard people enter the house. I listened for my *inamorata* to come to me. I heard a striking sound in the lower hall. Ha! what was it? 'Twas like a cry of pain."

"Closer I listen. I have not much faith in the female who plays the races—and plays the fools who play the races, too."

"Ha! still more striking! I hear a cry, this time not vague or uncertain; a cry of—*Murder!*"

Asher was nothing if not dramatic. He had forgotten his weakness as far as Nature would allow him to forget, and his eyes gleamed brightly as he vividly described the events of the night.

Ionice had grown pale. She was frightened. What was coming. She knew not, and the suspense was keen.

Still looking back to the scene of which he was telling Asher went on:

"I am deeply bound up in this thing, and I open the door a little. I look out; I see two men who carry a burden, and with them my charmer. The burden—Ha! I am not blind, and can guess on that burden. I know it is the form of a man. Dead or alive? I ask myself the question, but I know not. I can see only a form covered with cloth. The form is still; it moves not. I can guess the rest."

"I remember the cry, and it tells a good deal. The cry was that of *murder!* and it was conclusive. A man slain! Ha! not pleasant for him, but what is it to me? Nothing! I shrug my shoulders and go to my seat. A man the less. What of it? The world is full of men."

"Soon comes Lady Blanche. I say nothing of the killing, but talk of 'tips' as if I cared for the sport of fools. Bah! I want to bask in the rays of her smile, and what care I for anything else?"

"I stay for an hour or so, and then go out. The hour is so late there is no servant to escort me, and I go alone. Near the outer door I find a card. I pick it up and read the name upon it. Then I put it in my pocket and go my way."

"Days pass. I hear certain things in my association with Lady Blanche. I hear the name of Tereston; it is very familiar to me. Where have I heard it?"

"I have a suspicion, and I go to get the card I have mentioned. I cannot find it, or remember the name which I read on it. Bad, very bad! I am disgusted. Other days pass. Then I find the card in my room by accident. I read the name."

"It is Edmund Tereston!"

"I ask you now as I asked myself, then, how came the card in the house of the female giver of 'tips' right after the cry of *murder!*"

"Pay heed to me! I know that Edmund Tereston is missing. All of the case I do not know, but I bid you, Miss Tereston, and you, friend of hers, seek the once-divine Lady Blanche and ask her where the man is who cried *murder!* on that night!"

Asher ceased. His story was done, and his strength had gone out with it. He lay back panting for breath.

Ionice had become very pale. It would have been bad enough to hear such news under any condition, while the manner of the narrator had been so intense and striking that every word was driven home. He left her speechless, but Steve had never been more alert.

Seeing that the adventurer was for the moment oblivious to all but his sufferings, the detective leaned toward the girl and whispered:

"Do not despair! I am almost sure your father lives."

Not once betraying this belief to Asher, the officer proceeded to carry on the conversation. Closely he questioned him until all

was learned that the wounded man could impart.

Then he was duly thanked for his information, and the conversation made such that he would feel no dissatisfaction, and they prepared to depart after promising him their assistance in any way he needed.

Outside, again, Steve hurriedly made known what he had gained from the lips of the conspirators, themselves.

"Despite Asher's fears," he added, "I think Mr. Tereston lives, and I will summon a police force at once and make a raid on Lady Blanche's minor resort. If I do not err greatly we shall find him there."

Ionice was escorted home, and then the police-raid was made. It amounted to nothing. The place where Blanche had given "tips" had no occupant. The house was deserted.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE FATAL MEETING.

THE next night the bark known as the Red Rover lay as usual at her pier. The hour had grown somewhat late and all signs of life on her deck had ceased. There was no business being done around the craft in those days, and no one came there to visit her.

Like her crew the Red Rover seemed to sleep.

Off the line of docks a yacht was beating to and fro in a manner which would indicate a careless disposition on somebody's part to kill time by idle motion.

Down the street came a carriage. It proceeded to the edge of the pier next to the Red Rover, and then a man alighted from it and went to the bark.

Shortly after this the yacht approached the pier. A close watcher might have noticed that this last change was due to the showing of a light from the pier, but no such watcher was visible, except those who had shown the light.

Another delay, and then he who had left the carriage returned to that point. He looked into the door of the vehicle and spoke for some time with others inside.

Then there was a general alighting. Three other men came out.

It was to be seen that two of them supported the third, from some cause. He seemed hardly to possess power of motion, and submitted tamely to all they did. He was hurried out on the pier.

"Is all ready on the yacht?" asked one of the party.

"Yes."

"Then let us get this over as soon as possible. The situation makes me nervous."

"All is safe as you please. See! We have the scene entirely to ourselves."

"It's a risky job, all the same, Brockway, and I want it done."

They were now on the pier and fast nearing the yacht. The night was so dark that, the pier being obstructed in many places with various articles, they had to give constant attention to their foothold.

Occupied thus they did not see that the piles of obstructive articles suddenly gave forth moving things; they did not see other men rise almost in their path and wait for them.

Nearer, nearer yet!—then a cry from one of the first party.

"Look!"

A sudden stop. It was too late. Quickly the unknown closed in and surrounded them.

"In the name of the law I order you to surrender!"

It was the voice of Stevedore Steve.

None of the threatened men was in mood to recognize a voice, for they saw danger menacing them sharply.

"Lost!" cried he who had called a companion "Brockway," and he turned to run, but strong arms closed around him.

"Yield, Captain Thomas!" was the stern command.

A general struggle followed, but the men from the carriage, outnumbered and frightened, had no chance in the contest. In a very short time all were subdued and captured.

"Take them to the bark," directed Stevedore Steve. "I want to see what we have here, anyhow."

He then gave his own attention to the man who had seemed so helpless, and soon found he was both bound and gagged. Quickly the detective released him.

"In heaven's name, have mercy on me!" feebly exclaimed the man thus freed.

"Have no fear, sir; you are safe."

"Safe!"

"Your enemies are wholly subdued and captured."

"And I am saved?" cried the man, feverishly, incredulously.

"You are."

"Then may Heaven be praised!" was the devout cry.

"Sir, may I ask who you are?" added Steve.

"My name is Edmund Tereston!"

A smile of satisfaction and triumph passed over Steve's face. It was much to win such a victory—much to him, and—to Ionice. At thought of her, professional pride vanished. How much it meant to her! Smaller triumphs were as nothing compared to that.

Carefully the detective gave his own arm to the rescued man and escorted him to the bark. To that place the others had already gone, and the heretofore silent and deserted deck was spotted with men.

"To the cabin!" ordered Steve, and they made their way below.

The leader had expected to find the place named deserted, too, but as they entered an unexpected sight was presented. Benjamin Tereston was there.

The latter had risen as he heard them coming, and as Captain Thomes was near the front he did not at once perceive that anything had occurred which need alarm him. But then Steve led his charge forward, and Benjamin was unexpectedly confronted with his wronged brother.

The sight was a startling one for him. He looked; his eyes opened wide; his color fled; his face was the picture of horror. He had, as he thought, planned so that he would not meet the man he had aided to conspire against, and the shock was now equal to seeing him rise from the grave.

No word was spoken, but all the outsiders saw that something out of the ordinary course of events was transpiring, and they stood and watched in silence equal to that of the brothers.

Edmund Tereston looked almost worn out and wholly sick, but he rallied before the force of the moment. He gazed fixedly at his unnatural brother, but gazed in wordless rebuke. With dignity he waited for the other to break the painful pause.

Benjamin seemed to continue to lose color until he was of marble hue. Thus far his face had been motionless, but now it began to work convulsively—to twitch as if moved by writhing muscles. The horror in his face did not die out, and he was an object of pity in his present mood, whatever his sins might be.

Suddenly the pause was broken.

A groan escaped Benjamin's lips; he reeled for a moment and then fell in a heap to the floor.

"Fainted!" remarked an officer, nervously.

But Steve Starr abruptly moved and bent over the fallen man.

"Call a doctor!" he then commanded. "If this is not a stroke of apoplexy I am greatly in error."

A messenger hurried away, and then Steve had the fallen man carried to a state-room. This done he gave his own attention to making Edmund Tereston comfortable. He supplied him with a proper amount of whisky, and the medicine set the old man's blood to flowing anew.

"Who are you, sir, that is so kind to me?" Tereston then inquired.

"I am a detective."

"Then I am, indeed, safe. May Heaven be praised."

"One word, sir. I have long been on this case, and I know just how you have been wronged, but there is much I am curious about. Why was the bark scuttled at sea?"

"By order of my foes."

"So the insurance could be collected?"

"Yes."

"Will you make that plain?"

"This craft is claimed to be the Red Rover. It is not; it really is the Polly Ann, and it was the Red Rover that sunk. As you suspect, the scheme was to get the insurance on the cargo. In point of fact the cargo came here safely on this bark, and the other went to sea without a dollar of cargo,

but it was the plot to pretend that all was lost thus, while, really, the cargo was brought here and used."

"I thought as much; but how could the scheme be worked in Calcutta safely?"

"By first putting the cargo on the Polly Ann, and then discharging both crews on a plausible pretext. Shrewd knowledge of paints and chemicals enabled the plotters to mark out the name of each craft and put its substitute neatly and naturally in its place, and as the two barks were twin boats the cheat was not discovered, especially as the crews were new in both cases."

"Of course Hawk and Thomes were both in the scheme?"

"Yes. I came here with Thomes, and when I learned that we had the cargo here, while they intended to claim it was lost at sea, I would not agree to keep silent. Thomes had kept me out of sight all the way, unknown to the crew, by giving me a drug to make me ill, and then convincing me that I had a contagious disease and must keep my state-room."

"Once here I was taken to a house kept by a woman who is a race-track creature. There I tried to escape them, and on the moment of my arrival I struggled and cried 'murder!' but they struck me senseless and bore me to a prison-room."

"There I was kept until a few days ago, when I was taken to another house, and from there to this pier."

At this juncture the messenger came with the doctor. The latter entered to see Benjamin Tereston, but his work was short. Benjamin was dead.

The fight was over. The next morning found Captain Thomes, Rand Brockway and "Lady Blanche" in prison, and the plot was played to an end. It only remained to wind up the case, and this was done in due time.

The conspirators were all sent to Sing Sing ultimately—Brockway, Lady Blanche, Thomes, Mike and Hawk, the latter having recovered; and the sentences of the race-track queen and her chief ally were noticeably heavy. They are not likely to do more damage to the public for many years.

Asher Windham recovered and left New York, never again, perhaps, to be seen by those who figured with him in this story.

Trezzo Petresso was allowed to go with a severe rebuke, but the detective took Carma under his own protection, and is still caring for her well. She improves, and her future looks promising.

Pardon Gallup was properly remembered with money, and now carries his signs with extra dignity.

A new captain was found for the bark, and when she went to sea again, Hick Peters and Ben Bipps went with her. Curiously enough, she went in the service of "Tereston Brothers & Co." And thereby hangs a tale. Edmund was not willing to see the old firm die out, so he took up the business again, but only on one condition—that Robert Stephen Starr become his partner.

A year later the partnership received new impetus. It was all due to Ionice. By becoming Mrs. Starr she nailed the contract most thoroughly, and it bids fair to last.

Of course the matter of the insurance was duly adjusted with the companies holding the risks, and as nothing was claimed, there could be no dispute. Mr. Tereston recovered his health fully, and he is happy to know the flag of his company still floats over the bark.

THE END.

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